How On Earth Did We End Up Here?

Understanding Why the Twenty-First Century Church Looks the Way it Does

By Nick Park

Featuring the Poetry of Louis Hemmings
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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In 1994 they started the Solid Rock Church – known as ‘Ireland’s Multicultural Church.’ They also founded the ministry of the Church of God in Ireland. Nick still serves as Senior Pastor of the Solid Rock Church, while Janice serves as Worship and Prayer Pastor.

Nick is National Bishop of the Church of God in Ireland, Executive Director of Evangelical Alliance Ireland and holds an MTh in Applied Theology from the University of Chester. He has written or edited ten previous books. Nick has been elected on four occasions to the International Executive Council of the Church of God. He also serves on the Presidium of the Pentecostal European Fellowship and the Global Council of Empowered21 (a worldwide alliance of Pentecostal and Charismatic ministries).

Nick and Janice Park have a daughter, Kirsty, and live in Dromin village in County Louth.
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FOREWORD

Up the winding mountain roads outside Quito, Ecuador, is a large plateau overlooking the city and surrounding countryside. On any given day, tourists from across the region and around the world converge upon an expansive plaza surrounded by cafes and tourist shops. In the centre of the plaza is a museum with a tall pedestal supporting a huge model world globe. The gathering point, however, for the whole attraction is a line painted across the middle of the plaza.

There, tourists pose for photos while straddling the line, with one foot in the northern hemisphere and the other in the southern. It is an imaginary line, called ‘the Equator’ by geographers and cartographers, that stretches around the centre of the earth. If the painted line outside Quito were to continue, the tourists could follow it east to Nairobi or west to Singapore. At least, for the moment, they can post their travel photos to their Facebook friends with the claim, “Look, I’m standing at the place called Mitad del Mundo (the ‘Middle of the World’).”

Separated by time and space, Elijah the prophet - another man from another time - was also on a mountain. He wasn’t there as a tourist but as a tired and disillusioned servant of God, who confronted him with the question, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” With the discerning dialogue that followed, God commissioned the complaining prophet, “Go back the way you came” in order to anoint political leadership and a spiritual successor [Elisha] for the future (1 Kings 19:9, 15).

In this fascinating panorama of the development of the Christian movement, Nick Park ‘takes us to the line’ at the top of
the plateau where we can simultaneously look to our past in order
to interpret our future. His studied but very readable narrative is
both reflection and projection, at the same time providing
description and prescription (see Chapter 16, ‘So Where Do We
Go from Here?’).

Many in the emerging generation may echo the impatience of
the first-year seminary student who, after glancing over the
required course in ‘Church History,’ was overheard to complain,
“I didn’t come here to study church history; I came here to make
church history!” He, and all of us – both younger and older –
would be well reminded of the insight of historian E.H. Carr who
said, “You cannot look forward intelligently into the future unless
you are also prepared to look back attentively into the past.”

Park’s overview looks back to our past attentively without
getting lost in a mere listing of dates, persons, and events. It is an
honest remembrance of our sometimes painful, regretful and
embarrassing Christian family story. Thankfully, it is also a
prophetic call for today’s Christ followers to recover their
original, Biblical purpose in order to make a new, revisioned ‘His-
story’ for our generation and those who will follow.

This important book takes us, like Elijah, ‘back the way we
came.’ It is my hope that the book could be read and discussed
together by the senior and younger generations – for they need
each other. Elijah had to go back to find the younger successor in
order for the prophetic ministry and story to go forward. Elisha
needed a mentor who had lived the past story in order to find his
own way with a prophetic voice into an uncertain future.

In his Introduction, Park is convinced, “…that we can only
move forward to a better future if we understand where we are
right now. And we can’t understand where we are right now
without figuring out how on earth we ended up here.” In his final chapter, he concludes that, “The question of how on earth we ended up here is important. But only inasmuch as it helps us decide where we go next.” The provocative chapters in-between are as equally compelling as these incisive observations framing the story.

The book reflects the perceptive mind of a well-read researcher of the past and keen observer of the present. We can also be thankful that this book comes from the passionate heart of a pastor and church planter who connects people in real life to their past while introducing them to a preferred future. It is the commentary of a refugee from Christendom who has found true Christianity, and a call for authentic Christ-life in the context of a hostile, post-modern context.

My own missional journey has been enriched by working as a colleague ‘on the ground’ in Europe with Nick, his family, and the family of congregations he leads. In addition, we have walked together in the context of international leadership for a global church fellowship. In every place we have walked together - local and global - I have seen a pilgrim with a heart for Christ and His kingdom. It is my prayer that his perceptive book will bring to the Christian community an informed inspection of our past, an intelligent interpretation of our present, and an intense intercession for a great new move of God for our future.

Dr. Grant McClung, a veteran world missions leader and author, is President of Missions Resource Group (www.MissionsResourceGroup.org) and Missiological Advisor to the World Missions Commission of the Pentecostal World Fellowship.
INTRODUCTION

This is the bit where I’m supposed to sugar-coat Church History to make it seem like fun. In the Park household we used to have a pet border collie named Jack. Jack was an excitable sort of dog and, for some reason known only to himself and the veterinarian, this made him scratch all the time. So we had to give him a rather expensive tablet at various intervals. The problem is that Jack didn’t like the taste of the tablet, so I had to resort to all kinds of trickery and subterfuge to make sure that he took his medicine.

The first time I tried this, I broke the tablet, mixed it in with a can of dog food, and set it in the dog’s feeding bowl. A few minutes later I walked past Jack’s bowl and saw that he had eaten all his food but that the pieces of tablet, all licked nicely clean, were still lying at the bottom of the bowl! After that we experimented with all kinds of bait - chocolate, cream cheese, slices of ham - to entice that dog to swallow what, after all, was entirely for his own good and benefit.

I’ve seen some approaches to teaching Church History which aren’t much different to how I tried to trick Jack. Dress it up as something else and hope that the student or reader doesn’t realise that they’re really swallowing something that tastes quite nasty but which is ultimately going to do them some good!

What you’re about to read is really something quite different. I’m not interested in trying to get you to memorise any lists of events and dates. In fact, I’ve quite deliberately chosen to omit some of the biggest events in Church History altogether. If any
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Professor of Church History actually condescends to read this book, then they may well start tearing their hair out and shouting, ‘How could this bozo possibly miss out something so important?’

Understanding Where We Are

You see, this really isn’t an attempt to teach you Church History at all. I’m not a historian. I’m a pastor and a church planter who is continually trying to understand why we do things the way we do, and how we can do them better. The longer that I’ve been doing what I’m doing, I’ve become more convinced that we can only move forward to a better future if we understand where we are right now. And we can’t understand where we are right now without figuring out how on earth we ended up here.

Years ago I was driving along some narrow country roads in Ireland, trying to find a little village. This was in the days before GPS - but I’m not sure this place would have shown up on even the most detailed of navigation systems today. Eventually I saw an old farmer standing at the side of the road. I pulled over and asked the way to the village. He thought for a moment, scratched his ear a few times, and finally said, “Well, if I was going there I wouldn’t start my journey from here!” - a statement that was undoubtedly true, but was of very little help to me at that point in time.

I’ve often thought of that old farmer when I try to work out what kind of Church we are trying to build for future generations. If anyone was trying to build a vibrant and relevant Church for the Twenty-First Century, then I’m sure they wouldn’t begin with what we’ve got now. Yet, when I read the New Testament, particularly the Book of Acts, I see a Church that was on the right
track. They certainly had their fair share of problems - some of the situations referred to in Paul’s Epistles would give any Pastor sleepless nights - but they were undoubtedly headed in the right direction.

What Happened?

The New Testament paints a wonderful picture of God’s plan for the Church. It tells us that we are part of a strategy to be Christ’s witnesses to the ends of the earth in the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). It tells us that we are to carry the Gospel to every ethnic group and help them become followers of Jesus (Matthew 28:19-20). It tells us that the Church is going to be taught and guided by leaders who will be supernaturally gifted by the Holy Spirit, producing a Church that is united, mature and not prone to chasing after fads and false doctrines (Ephesians 4:11-16). It tells us that this Church is to be the fullness of God Himself (Ephesians 1:23), is to be the workmanship of God (Ephesians 2:10), will demonstrate the manifold wisdom of God to all creation (Ephesians 3:10-11), and will be a radiant Church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish (Ephesians 5:25-27).

So what happened? How did such an exciting living organism, with such a glorious future before her, become something with all the characteristics of a fossilized institution? How come today’s Christianity seems to have got further away from that future in the last 2000 years, instead of getting closer to it? I completely understand that most people don’t share my passion for, and interest in, history. I sympathize with those believers who have no desire to study Church History as a subject and can’t remember which Pope appointed which Archbishop, or which
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battle occurred when. However, I think every Christian who has even the slightest desire to follow Jesus should be interested in asking the question: How on earth did we end up here?

**Learning what is Valuable**

We also need to be aware of our past in order to know what is worth keeping and what needs to be jettisoned.

Imagine that you inherited a house and all its contents from an elderly relative. You climb into the attic and discover that it is piled high with the accumulated junk of seventy years or more. If you hate clutter and junk, then the temptation will be to throw everything out. But then, hidden under all that junk, you find a painting. You do some research and discover that this painting has been in the family for generations. You also find that some very determined art thieves did everything they could to defraud your family of that painting. Some of your ancestors were so determined to hold on to that painting that they actually went to prison and suffered great hardship rather than allow that work of art to be stolen from the family’s possession. Now you start looking at that painting a little bit differently. Maybe, you reason, if this painting was so important to people so long ago, and even worth fighting over, then you should resist the temptation to throw it in the trash and should try to ascertain its true value.

The Church is sometimes a bit like that. We get all these beliefs and traditions handed down to us, and sure, some of them are junk and need to be thrown away. But others are valuable - so valuable that people were prepared to suffer and even lay down their lives rather than let them go. Knowing something of how on earth we ended up here helps us to understand what is worth holding on to.
Learning from Mistakes

Also, we need to learn from the mistakes of the past. There is an easy or a hard way to learn anything. The hardest way to learn something is to make mistakes all the way along and to learn from your mistakes. That is an effective way of learning - but it's painful. If possible it is much easier, and less painful, to learn from the mistakes of others.

The philosopher George Santayana once wrote, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” I first read those words as I was coming to the end of a visit to the Dachau Concentration Camp near Munich, Germany. I had stood in tearful silence viewing the photographs and objects that documented man’s inhumanity to man. I had stepped onto the grass strip beside the camp fence, and reflected on the fact that any prisoner taking a similar step would have been instantly shot. Indeed, some of them were so driven to despair by life in the camp that they deliberately stepped onto the grass strip and committed ‘suicide by guard’ in order to end it all. Reading Santayana’s famous quote impressed upon me once and for all that if we fail to understand the lessons of history then we run a terrible risk of repeating its mistakes.

There is no doubt that, over the centuries, many horrible things have been said and done in the name of Christianity. The Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, and the Salem Witch Trials all spring to mind. Those of us who are committed Christians can, quite correctly, point out that these are nothing to do with how we live out our faith today. But, rightly or wrongly, these are the kinds of things that some people think of when we start talking about Christianity. Donald Miller, in his excellent and entertaining book Blue Like Jazz, tells how he and a friend set up
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a Confessional Booth at their extremely liberal College. Every time a student stumbled into their booth (usually stumbling literally, due to over-consumption of alcohol) Don and his friend would confound everyone’s expectations by doing the confessing on behalf of the Christian Church. They would apologise for all the wicked things that had been done in the name of Christianity. Then they would humbly ask the confused student who had entered their booth to forgive them.²

Personally I think that’s a great idea, and sometimes Christians could win a much better hearing by admitting our past failings and showing a bit of genuine humility. But in the end there’s only so much apologising we can do. We can’t keep on forever apologising for stuff that happened long before we were born. What we can do, however, is to make sure that wicked men don’t use Christianity as a cloak or excuse for similar atrocities in the future. How do we do that? By understanding how such things could have happened in the past.

So, now I hope you see why I’m passionate about understanding the Church’s past. It’s not about disguising the dog’s tablet in order to trick you into studying Church History, but it is all about asking how on earth we ended up here so we can get to somewhere better.
One of the key verses in understanding the beginning of the Christian Church is Acts 1:8. Just before He ascended into heaven Jesus said to His disciples, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

That statement from Jesus seemed very simple, but contained within it were several ideas that would inevitably lead the Christian Church in directions that none of those early disciples could have imagined. I like to think of those ideas as being like seeds that fall into cracks in a concrete pathway. At first they seem insignificant, but eventually they grow into trees that have the strength and power to crack the concrete pathway wide open.
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THAT’S THE SPIRIT!
(How We Ended Up Getting from Jesus to the Church)

“He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matthew 3:11)

The first seed that would split the concrete pathway would be the role of the Holy Spirit. We see the Holy Spirit at work in the Old Testament, but in a way that was generally confined to a few people, and in a very temporary way. For example, the Spirit would come upon someone like Samson and enable him to do some mighty feats of strength against the Philistines, but then the Spirit would depart again (Judges 14:19-20). The rest of the Israelites, however, had to spend their entire lives muddling through as best as they could without any such manifestation of the Spirit’s power.

An Abiding Presence for All Believers

In the New Testament we see something quite different. Jesus, at His baptism, identified Himself with the sins and salvation of mankind. The Spirit descended upon Him (Matthew 3:13-17) and, from that moment forth, He was the man perfectly filled with the Spirit. The Holy Spirit now indwelt Him in a permanent way, leading Him and empowering Him. A temporary
visitation of the Spirit was now replaced by a permanent indwelling.

But that wasn’t all. This was not just an experience for Jesus or a select few. He promised that His followers would also enjoy this abiding presence of the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-17). In fact, following His death and resurrection, He breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22). This could fittingly be described as the moment when those first disciples were ‘saved’ in the New Testament sense of the word. They had met the essential qualification of confessing with their mouths that Jesus was Lord, and believing in their hearts that God had raised Him from the dead (Romans 10:9).

This salvation experience, by which the Holy Spirit takes up residence in the heart of a believer, was not just for the first disciples but for every Christian. In fact, you can’t be a Christian without it! The apostle Paul clearly taught if anyone did not have the Spirit then they didn’t even belong to Christ (Romans 8:9).

But the work of the Holy Spirit in the early Church didn’t stop there. Even after receiving the Spirit in John Chapter 20, those same disciples were baptised, or filled, with the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). Now, in addition to the Spirit dwelling in their hearts, He manifested Himself in various dramatic ways. He gave them power to be witnesses for Christ, as had been promised. He moved in their lives through miracles and supernatural gifts. He empowered some of them to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor/teachers, thereby providing dynamic Spirit-filled leadership for the Church.

All of this activity of the Holy Spirit marked a fundamental shift in how the presence of God operated among His people. A temporary empowerment had been replaced with something
permanent, and a localised presence of God now gave way to a presence of God, that extended to wherever those early believers would go. This is why Jesus had commanded them, once they were empowered by the Spirit, to go further afield to the ends of the earth. The power of the Spirit was no longer confined to the times and places where something special happened in the Old Testament, or even to the places where Jesus walked during His life and ministry. Now the power of the Spirit could be permanently displayed and manifested all over the world!

No Limits

This was a crucial break with the Jewish faith, even if most of the disciples didn’t realise it yet. Judaism was centred in Jerusalem. No matter what happened anywhere else, Jerusalem was the place where everything was focused. The Temple was in Jerusalem, as were the sacrifices and the priesthood.

For the Church, however, the presence of God the Holy Spirit in every believer meant that God could never again be confined to a geographical location. The Body of Christ, comprising all believers wherever in the world they might be, is the Temple. The sacrifice is Christ’s death for us, and that is appropriated by faith wherever we are. All of us are kings and priests in the Kingdom of God. So, due to the presence of the Spirit in every believer, every land becomes ‘The Holy Land’ and every city where believers meet is ‘The Holy City.’

The crazy thing is that the Church didn’t grasp this at first. They actually tried to keep the Spirit’s presence in Jerusalem. They were reluctant to go to Samaria or Judea, let alone to the ends of the earth. Thankfully God has a way of pushing us out to where we should be if we fail to go there ourselves. Therefore,
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He permitted persecution to come against the Church and to scatter them to the very places where Jesus said they were to be His witnesses (Acts 8:1).

No one man was the leader of the early Church. At times we see Peter taking a leading role (Acts 2:14), but then we also see James, the brother of Jesus, stepping forward and calling the shots (Acts 15:13-21). It would be fair and accurate to say that the Holy Spirit was the leader of the early Church. He used the apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor/teachers to lead the Church in the right direction and to instruct them in what to believe and how to behave.

Spirit-Led Leadership

At first it was easy for these Spirit-filled leaders to lead and instruct the Church. When everything was taking place in Jerusalem, they were able to speak with the believers every day in the Temple courts. Even when the disciples were scattered throughout Samaria and Judea, the leaders were able to travel around and to keep imparting vision and faith. However, as the Church spread across the globe, it was inevitable that the comparatively small number of those who were eye-witnesses to the resurrection would eventually be unable to maintain face-to-face contact with all the Church. This meant that two important developments had to take place.

The first way that Spirit-anointed leadership could continue to lead a rapidly growing and spreading Church was by creating more leaders. Interestingly, we see the first attempt to do this in Acts 1:20-26. The eleven apostles wanted to replace the vacancy left by the defection and death of Judas Iscariot. They attempted to do this by an Old Testament method - by casting lots. So they
picked a guy called Matthias, of whom we never hear anything again!

Thankfully the next attempt at recognising and releasing new leadership was based more on the Holy Spirit than on Old Testament or Jewish traditions. When the need for new leadership became absolutely pressing, the Church sought for leaders who were “known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3). These leaders were chosen by the entire assembly of the Church - an acknowledgment that the Spirit was present and operational in the life of all believers, not just a select few.

As the Church continued to spread, God raised up more leadership through the Holy Spirit. Saul of Tarsus, a proud religious Pharisee, was stopped in his tracks by a vision of Jesus Christ and called to be an apostle (Acts 26:12-18). Other Spirit-filled leaders developed such as Barnabas, Silas, Apollos, Timothy, Titus, Priscilla and Aquila, Tychicus, Andronicus and Junia.

What is vital for us to realise is that it was God who called men and women to leadership in the Church. Other leaders may indeed have laid hands on them, but that was not what made them leaders. God had already called these people to leadership, and the laying on of hands was a public confirmation and endorsement of something that God had already done. Also, leaders were recognised for the presence of the Spirit in their lives, not for the position that they held. We can see this when Philip first preached the Gospel in Samaria. The Holy Spirit enabled Philip to do many miraculous works, but for some reason none of the Samaritan converts received the baptism of the Spirit in the same way as those in Jerusalem. Therefore, Peter and John came to Samaria and laid hands on the new converts,
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who were filled with the Spirit in a dramatic way (Acts 8:5-19). The apostles were needed, not because the Samaritans needed the endorsement of someone holding a lofty position, but because they had a gift from the Spirit that would help this new church plant.

Also, we see nothing in the New Testament of the idea of a clergy/laity divide. The apostles, prophets and other Spirit-empowered leaders were not primarily there to minister to the needs of the Church. They were there to equip all the members of the Church (the saints) to minister to one another (Ephesians 4:11-12).

The second way in which Spirit-led leadership could adapt to a growing and spreading Church was for the Holy Spirit to inspire these leaders to write down their instructions, and their experiences of Jesus, so they could impact a much larger and widespread group of people. We'll have a lot more to say about that shortly, but first we have to examine another of those seeds in Acts 1:8 that was destined to split open the concrete pathway.
What in the World?

2

WHAT IN THE WORLD?
(How We Ended Up with a Worldwide Church Rather Than a Jewish Sect)

“The field is the world” (Matthew 13:38)

Jesus said that His Spirit-empowered followers would be His witnesses to the ends of the earth. Again, this simple statement contained a principle in seed form that, unbeknown to the early disciples, was to have momentous consequences.

The Church began as a branch of the Jewish religion. Jesus was a Jew. All of his first disciples and followers were Jews. Apart from a brief period as a childhood refugee in Egypt, He spent His entire life in Palestine - a tiny land measuring just 150 miles by 60 miles. His entire ministry took place in Palestine. The Spirit was poured out on the Church during a Jewish feast in Jerusalem. They used to meet daily in the grounds of the Jewish Temple. Their Bible was the Jewish Scriptures - what we now call the Old Testament.

A Wider Vision

Yet God had always intended that the Jewish people would look outward rather than inward. Abraham was called to follow God so that all peoples on earth would be blessed through him
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(Genesis 12:3). The prophet Isaiah, writing over 700 years before Christ, said:

It is too small a thing for you to be My servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring My salvation to the ends of the earth. (Isaiah 49:6)

Yet Israel had repeatedly forgotten that calling and looked inward. The times when the Israelites were at their best were when they understood that they were chosen by God in order to show forth His glory to the rest of the world. The times when the Israelites were at their worst were when they began to think that they were chosen by God because God didn’t actually like the rest of mankind.

One of the shortest poems ever written was by a British journalist (who also happened to be a Soviet spy) called William Norman Ewer. He wrote, “How odd of God, to choose the Jews.”

To which Cecil Browne wittily responded, “But not so odd, as those who choose, a Jewish God, yet spurn the Jews.”

The fact is that it would have been odd of God to choose the Jews if He was simply making them His pets, and showing them favour while busily smiting and sending everyone else to hell. But that was never God’s purpose. God chose the Jews so that through them He could prepare the way for a Saviour to come that would make salvation available to the entire human race.

So, just as God had promised Abraham, Jesus came and God called the Church into being. The angels who announced His birth sang of peace coming to men on earth (Luke 2:14). Wise men came from far off Gentile nations to worship Him (Matthew 2:1-2). When He was eight days old Simeon prophesied over Him
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that He would be “a light for revelation to the Gentiles” (Luke 2:32). His public ministry was preceded by John the Baptist preparing the way so that “all mankind will see God’s salvation” (Luke 3:6). Jesus Himself taught that many of the Jews would be excluded from salvation because of their unbelief, but that people would come from the east, the west, the north and the south and would take their places in the Kingdom of God (Luke 13:25-30).

He explained that He was the Saviour of the entire world - the ‘whosoever’ (John 3:16). He prophesied that His Gospel would be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations (Matthew 24:14). When Jesus died the inscription over His head declared Him to be ‘the King of the Jews’ - but it was written in Latin and Greek as well as in Aramaic (John 19:19-20). The Great Commission ordered his followers to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). As we have already seen, His last words before His ascension into heaven were that the Holy Spirit would empower the Church to be witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

The defining miracle of the Day of Pentecost was when His followers spoke in a multitude of foreign languages (Acts 2:5-11). When Peter stood up to preach on that same day, he quoted from the prophet Joel to the effect that God would pour out His Spirit onto all people (Acts 2:17). Not only that, but in the same sermon Peter declared that the gift of the Holy Spirit was not just for his hearers but also “for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:39).

A Jewish Church

Yet, despite all this, the Church was a Jewish Church - it had to make the leap from being a branch of the Jewish religion to becoming a faith for the entire world. Taking that step was
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possibly the most important issue that faced early Christianity. Without it you wouldn’t be reading this book, and Christianity would just be a little splinter group among Jews that might make interesting viewing for an occasional documentary on the National Geographic Channel. How could this huge change happen?

God used two utterly unexpected instruments to transform Christianity into a genuine faith that could embrace the whole world. The first would be persecution. The second would be Saul of Tarsus - better known to us as the apostle Paul.

**Jewish Persecution**

Persecution, initially, came not from the Romans but rather from the Jews. The Jewish religious leaders of the day quickly realised that Christianity posed a threat to them on several levels.

Firstly, Christians claimed that Jesus was God. The Jewish leaders, and probably most Jews, saw this claim as being blasphemous and striking at the very core of their faith. The centrepiece of the morning and evening prayer services in Judaism is the *Shema* - or the recitation of Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our Lord, the Lord is One.” This declaration of faith would often be the earliest words a Jewish child would ever remember hearing. You can imagine the horror, and hatred, that would be inspired by this group of Galileans who claimed that a man from Nazareth was actually God!

The second way in which Christianity threatened Judaism was in its relationship with the Roman Empire. The Romans and the Jews had a fair bit of history going on between them. They had already fought one war, in 63 BC, and the Romans were seen as an occupation force in Palestine. At the time of Jesus this had
settled down into an uneasy truce. The Romans actually showed the Jews more toleration on the religious front than they did anyone else, and the Jewish leadership concentrated on purely religious issues rather than getting involved in politics. This meant that the Jewish leaders were anxious about anything that sounded like it might provoke the Romans. For example, we know that some of them said of Jesus, “If we let Him go on like this, everyone will believe in Him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” To this Caiaphas, the high priest, responded, “You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish” (John 11:48-50).

The Jews were right to be so concerned about the threat of Rome. In less than forty years the Zealots, combining nationalism and religion, would launch a rebellion that would result in Roman armies destroying Jerusalem, demolishing the Temple, killing over a million people and carrying 100,000 more off into slavery. The destruction was so complete and devastating to Judaism that Titus, the victorious Roman general who would later become emperor, refused to accept a wreath of victory on the grounds that there was no merit in vanquishing a people so obviously forsaken by their own God.4

In such a political climate it should be clear why the Jewish authorities were so alarmed by Christianity. Thousands of Jews were waiting for the promised Messiah, or Christ, to come and deliver them from the yoke of Roman oppression. Therefore, any religious movement that spoke of the Christ as having come, or spoke about a king other than Caesar, had the potential to upset the applecart completely and to turn Jerusalem into a bloodbath. The most sensible decision, from a human standpoint, would be
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for the Jewish authorities to eradicate Christianity as quickly as possible. Even if they couldn’t destroy Christianity altogether, they could point out to the Romans that they had done everything they could to persecute the Christians and so, hopefully, the Romans would recognize that Judaism and Christianity were two separate brands of religion and not blame the Jews for anything that the Christians might be doing or teaching.

Popularity and Jealousy

The third reason why the Jewish leaders persecuted the Christians, was because of the new faith’s massive popularity. We know that at least 500 disciples of Christ were around in the short period between Christ’s resurrection and His ascension into heaven (1 Corinthians 15:6). This number seems to have dwindled somewhat by the Day of Pentecost. Possibly some of them had gone back to Galilee, while others just got fed up with waiting for the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Either way, we are told that the believers now comprised a group of about 120 (Acts 1:15). This small group of believers was about to experience some explosive growth. They increased by 3000 after the events of the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41). The Lord added to this number on a daily basis (Acts 2:47), and a short time later we are informed that their numbers had swelled to about 5000 (Acts 4:4). As things continued to heat up in Jerusalem, more and more men and women were added to their number, even though they were afraid to be publicly identified with the Church (Acts 5:13-14). Some time later we are told that the number of disciples was increasing, leading to the need to appoint more leaders (Acts 6:1). After more leaders were appointed, the growth continued so
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that “the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7).

If we put all this information together, then it is reasonable to estimate that the number of Christians had increased to anywhere between 10,000 and 20,000 by the time we get to Acts Chapter Seven. Try to imagine the turmoil that was caused when this huge crowd used to gather daily in the Temple courts to worship God and to teach about Jesus the risen Messiah. We’re talking about a daily gathering of 10% of the entire population of the city! It must have seemed to the Jewish authorities that their religious position was about to be swamped by the rising tide of this new teaching. Persecuting the Christians must have seemed like the only way to ensure their own survival as the majority faith.

Out of Jerusalem

Later on Rome would become the primary persecutor - but the Jewish persecution of Christians, steadily increasing in intensity, pushed them out of Jerusalem to Samaria and further afield (Acts 8:1). This, as we have already seen, was where Jesus had told His followers to go in the first place. To those early Christians, this persecution was undoubtedly painful, and they must have wondered why God was permitting the Devil to inflict such a blow upon them. But in truth it pushed them out to be obedient when they had failed to obey the clear and direct instructions Jesus had given them in Acts 1:8.

Once the Church scattered out of Jerusalem there was no going back. As a stone dropped into a pool of water produces ever-widening ripples, the followers of Christ were going to keep on spreading in every direction. The persecution not only pushed
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them out of the physical city of Jerusalem - it also pushed them out of the fold of the Jewish religion. This process is illustrated clearly by what happened to Paul in Corinth. Up to this point, Paul had a custom, when he entered a new town, of going to the synagogue and trying to convert the Jews (Acts 17:1-4). Even though God had called him to reach the Gentiles, his own Jewish background caused him to keep on trying to reach his fellow Jews. Finally, in Corinth, the Jewish opposition became so abusive that Paul shook out his clothes in protest. According to noted biblical scholar F.F. Bruce, shaking out your clothes was a Jewish way of saying that you would have nothing more to do with someone and that from now on you would treat them like a heathen. Paul declared, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles” (Acts 18:6). Paul is saying that he knows when he’s not wanted!

As we read John’s Gospel, we can clearly see how the Christians were pushed out of Judaism. The author of this Gospel was clearly born and raised as a Jew. But the Church has been so rejected by the Jewish religion that now the Gospel refers to the opponents of Christ numerous times as ‘the Jews’ (John 8:48). The Gospel writer has been pushed away so often that now he doesn’t even think of himself as a Jew anymore. Now he is a Christian.

I mentioned earlier that God used two utterly unexpected instruments to transform Christianity into a genuine faith that could embrace the whole world. The first was persecution. The second was to be the apostle Paul.
The Apostle to the Gentiles

Persecution led directly to Paul. The first mention we have of this man is that he looked after the garments of those who stoned Stephen to death, and that he approved of Stephen’s murder (Acts 7:58-8:1). Next we see him taking an active role in tracking down and imprisoning Christian believers (Acts 9:1-2). While on one of his persecuting missions, he had a dramatic vision of Jesus Christ and was supernaturally blinded. He was subsequently healed through a courageous believer laying hands on him in prayer, and received baptism and a call to take the Gospel to the Gentiles.

Peter was the first to preach to the Gentiles. He shared the Gospel in Cornelius’ household and not only led a number of Gentiles to Christ, but also baptised them as Christians (Acts 10:44-48). Significantly we do not see anywhere that Peter insisted that they should now become Jews, but rather he received a vision that suggested that the Jewish food laws that separated them from the Gentiles were now being relaxed (Acts 11:5-9). Furthermore, Peter was not some ‘lone wolf’ operating in opposition to the rest of the Church. The other apostles and brothers that had remained in Jerusalem approved enthusiastically of his actions (Acts 11:18).

But, while Peter was the first to preach to the Gentiles, Paul was the first to really grasp the implication of Gentiles getting saved. Paul combined several important qualities. He was well versed in the Old Testament Scriptures, highly learned, extremely intelligent, and had a burning passion to share the Gospel with the lost and to establish churches.

Jesus had shared a parable about how a scribe who would get saved would be doubly blessed, because he could draw on...
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Paul was the personification of that parable. He had all the Old Testament and legal knowledge of a Jewish scribe, but he also possessed the passion of a man dedicated to living for Jesus Christ. Although Jewish, he had been born and raised outside of Palestine, in Tarsus - a Greek city which is now part of modern Turkey. He knew how Gentiles thought, and understood what made them tick. He was a man uniquely qualified to help the Church make the leap from being a Jewish sect to becoming a worldwide faith.

Grasping the Implications

Paul understood that the process which started when Peter preached to the Gentiles in Cornelius’ house was so much more than just adding a few Gentiles into a branch of Judaism. All those Scriptural promises about reaching the nations were about to be fulfilled. The death of Jesus Christ had instituted a new covenant between God and man. These ideas are worked out and expressed most clearly in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. The Jewish law had operated as a schoolmaster, pointing the way forward to the coming of Christ. But now that Christ had come, Christian believers were no longer under the Jewish law. Many parts of the law, particularly ceremonial rituals like circumcision and the laws about clean and unclean food, were fulfilled in Christ and no longer binding upon believers. Christians were still to live holy lives according to the moral directions in the law, but this was to be achieved by the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives – rather than by legalistically observing regulations and commandments (Galatians 5:16-18).

The implications of this teaching were laid out with devastating clarity by Paul in his letter to the Colossians. The
written code, he said, was now cancelled because it was nailed to the Cross along with Jesus Christ. “Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ” (Colossians 2:16-17).

Translatability

Such a teaching was obviously impossible to reconcile with remaining part of the Jewish religion. From this moment forward, Christianity was looking outward to the nations of the world rather than looking backward to Jerusalem. According to Lamin Sanneh, an African theologian and Professor of History at Yale University, this has been the beauty of the Christian Gospel ever since. It can be translated into every language and culture on the face of the earth without losing any of its truth and power. This ‘translatability’ is what distinguishes Christianity from the other two great monotheistic (belief in only one God) religions of the world.  

Judaism is essentially a Hebrew religion. Its Scriptures are written in Hebrew and virtually all its followers are ethnically part of the Hebrew race. Even though Jews live all over the world, their spiritual home is clearly in their Holy Land of Israel.

Similarly, Islam is an Arabic religion. Its holy book, the Qur’an, is written in Arabic. Indeed Muslim scholars refer to the Qur’an in other languages as being interpretations, rather than translations. They hold that it should only be recited in Arabic, and loses its sacred character in any other language. This is why Muslims in other nations often adopt Arabic styles of dress and learn to pray in Arabic. Although Islam has spread to many
nations, the spiritual home of Muslims is clearly in Arabia - the land of Medina and Mecca.

But Christianity is a faith that transcends all cultures and belongs to no one single nation. Its very Scriptures, which we will look at very shortly, enshrine the principle of translatability even in their original language. Jesus spoke Aramaic, a language related to Hebrew. Yet the Four Gospels were written in Greek. So, even the original texts of the Gospels are themselves translating the words of Jesus from another language. This means that there are no theological barriers to stop Christians freely translating the Scriptures, and the way Christianity adapts to culture, for every nation on earth.

This unique cross-cultural nature of the Christian Gospel was wonderfully illustrated on the cover of Philip Jenkins’ fascinating book *The Next Christendom.* It showed four pictorial representations of Jesus Christ from Christian traditions in various parts of the world. One picture portrayed Jesus as a Middle Eastern Palestinian, another as a Chinese man, the third portrayed Him as a European, while the fourth represented Jesus as African. Now, I’m not crazy about painting pictures of Jesus in the first place, and we all know that the Middle Eastern Palestinian is the only representation that has any basis in historical reality. But these pictures also communicate an important truth, that people from anywhere in the world can receive the Gospel and enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ, all without having to abandon their own nationality and culture.

Paul did not invent this cross-cultural translatability of the Gospel. It was always there in the Old Testament, and it was expanded in the life and teachings of Jesus. But Paul is the person
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we should thank for recognising how it needed to be worked out within Christianity.

A Process

By the way, these issues took time to be worked out. Sometimes we read the Book of Acts and, as we rush from one chapter to the next, we get the idea that everything happened within the space of a few weeks or months. That was not the case at all. Scholars disagree as to the exact chronology, or dating, of every event in Acts - but we can reconstruct a rough timetable of how things happened. Stephen’s martyrdom probably occurred about five years after the Day of Pentecost, and Paul’s conversion a year later. The first Gentile converts in Cornelius’ household were about 40 AD, that’s ten years after Pentecost, and the Council of Jerusalem was another ten years later. The argument about the Gentiles was still rumbling on when Paul wrote Galatians. So we can see that, despite all the teaching in the Old Testament, despite the Great Commission, despite Acts 1:8, it still took the Church twenty years or more to fully grasp that the Gospel was for all men, not just for Jews or converts to Judaism. So, the next time you get frustrated at the slow pace of change in your church today, remember that it’s always been like that!

All this discussion of Paul leads us to the third seed contained in Acts 1:8 that was to split open a concrete pathway. The first followers of Jesus were not just to go to the ends of the earth - they were to be His witnesses. That bearing witness would involve two new, and vitally important, aspects of the Christian Church. One was the development of new Scriptures (the Book) and the other was an agreed body of belief that was essential to following Jesus (the Faith).
THE BOOK OF BOOKS  
(How We Ended Up with Our Bible)

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16)

The big connection between Paul and the New Testament is that he wrote so much of it. So let’s look at how the Bible came to be so important to the early Church.

The Old Testament

At first, as I’ve already said, the Church’s Bible was the Old Testament. Jesus used the Jewish Scriptures as a foundation for His teaching. He declared that Scripture could not be broken (John 10:35) and referred to it as “the Word of God” (Matthew 15:6). He repeatedly quoted from the Old Testament and referred to Old Testament characters and events. The early Christians followed this pattern. Throughout the Book of Acts we find Peter, Stephen, Philip, Paul and James all using the Old Testament to support their preaching and teaching about Jesus Christ. It is especially significant that, when something new or important was taking place, such as the Day of Pentecost or extending the Gospel to the Gentiles, that they were careful to demonstrate that these things were consistent with, and
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For a while that was enough for the Early Church. They had the Old Testament. They had the apostles and other eye-witnesses who travelled from church to church recounting their experiences of Jesus and their memories of His teaching. Even after they had moved on to another church, people would continue to repeat what they had heard to one another. This was an age where many people were illiterate, and passing on history and teaching orally was nothing unusual. After all, they reasoned, Jesus could return any day - so what was the point of writing any of this stuff down in a book? Anyway, if they forgot any of the teaching it wouldn’t be that long until one of the apostles came to visit again and to remind them.

The Need for More Scripture

But gradually the Church began to realise that they needed something more. As the Church spread to different cultures then new problems cropped up that didn’t seem to be covered by the Old Testament or by anything that the apostles reported Jesus to have said. For example, in some cities, if you wanted to prosper as a craftsman then you had to belong to one of the workers’ guilds. This meant you had to attend dinners where the food had previously been sacrificed to idols. But Jesus hadn’t mentioned anything about guilds and their dinners. What was the Christian to do?

Also, they had been waiting for twenty years or more and Jesus still hadn’t returned. They knew He could come back at any time, but what if He chose not to do so for another fifty years?
The Book of Books

Or even another 2000 years? Maybe it would be better to start getting things down in writing, just in case?

As the Church continued to multiply, it became harder and harder for the apostles to get round all the scattered congregations. Things were easy when there were only three or four churches. But what about when there were hundreds of churches? And what if some of those churches were in far off places such as Ethiopia, Persia and India? There was no way the apostles could visit all the churches regularly, particularly since even apostles grow older and can't travel as easily as they used to.

And that raised another problem. The apostles weren't getting any younger. Some of them had already died, sometimes, like James, suffering violent death during times of persecution (Acts 12:1-2). It was obvious that the apostles weren't going to live forever, so shouldn't some of them start writing down their memories of Jesus so that future generations of believers would have a written record after their deaths?

Occasional Letters

Some of Paul's letters were the first New Testament Scriptures written. They dealt with problems that were occurring in the churches. We call them occasional epistles because they were written on a specific occasion to deal with specific issues.

Galatians was written to stress the relationship between Jews and Gentiles now that the Gospel had come. The occasion that called for its writing was that some false teachers were trying to persuade Gentile believers to get circumcised, to become Jews, and to obey all the Old Testament Jewish laws in order to be saved.
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1 Corinthians was written to deal with a whole bunch of pastoral problems that were cropping up in the Corinthian Church. There were cliques and divisions, immorality in the church, misunderstandings and abuse of spiritual gifts, and various false teachings.

2 Corinthians was written to follow up on at least one outstanding issue from the previous letter. Another occasion for its writing was that the church had made a financial commitment to give to the poor in Jerusalem but had failed to honour their pledge.

1 and 2 Thessalonians were written to address some misunderstandings that the members there had concerning the second Coming of Christ.

Paul sent other occasional letters to encourage particular churches (Philippians) to provide teaching for particular churches (Romans) or to instruct individuals (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon).

Although all the letters we’ve mentioned so far were sent to specific churches, they were found to be so helpful that soon copies were made and passed on to other churches so that they could benefit from the teaching as well. Other letters appear to have been deliberately written as circular letters, to be passed from church to church. This would explain why Ephesians contains almost no personal greetings to individuals, and doesn’t refer to specific problems or issues in the Ephesian Church. Ephesus may just have been the first place to which the letter was sent. We also see at the end of Colossians that Paul instructs them to pass their letter on to the Laodiceans (Colossians 4:16).
Other leaders and apostles began writing general letters. By ‘general’ we mean that they weren’t sent to one particular congregation, but were intended to be read by all the churches. This is why some Bibles, particularly translations like the King James Version, have headings such as ‘The General Epistle of James.’ The General Epistles are James, both letters of Peter, the three letters of John, and Jude.

Another letter, Hebrews, was written to Jewish converts to Christianity who were scattered all over the Roman world. Some Bibles give it a heading that appears to suggest that Paul was the author, but it is important that we realise that such headings are added by editors and are not actually part of the biblical text. The letter doesn’t actually say who wrote it. The misunderstanding probably came about because the first biblical manuscripts were written on scrolls, not in books, and Hebrews ended up being bundled together with all the scrolls of Paul’s epistles.

All these letters blessed the readers so much that they were copied hundreds of times and circulated around the ever-growing and spreading number of churches. It’s very possible that, in the first place, neither the authors nor the readers realised that these books would become Scripture. They may simply have found them useful and passed them on to each other, just like we might lend each other a book that we’ve found to be particularly inspiring or helpful. But gradually the early Christians began to see that God was speaking to them through these letters just as He spoke to them through the Old Testament Scriptures. They began to read the letters alongside the Old Testament in their church services, to treat them as a final authority in deciding disputes, and to refer to them as ‘the Word of God.’
How on Earth Did We End Up Here?

By the time Peter was writing his second letter, possibly around 60 AD, the letters of Paul were already being recognised as a new kind of Scripture to add to the Old Testament. Peter says of Paul's writings, “His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction” (2 Peter 3:16).

Gospels

Next the Church began to realise that they needed written records of Jesus’ life and ministry. This was a priority that had to be completed while eye-witnesses were still alive. The first Gospel to be written was probably Mark. We know that both Matthew and Luke, when they were writing their Gospels, checked them against Mark and sometimes used the exact same wording as him. This is entirely what you would expect any careful historian or author to do. They would write down their own memories. Then they would interview other eye-witnesses to see what they remembered. Finally, they would compare their material with what other Gospel writers had recorded.

It’s important to realise that the Gospel writers were not writing history text books or biographies. They did not just write down every little bit of information about Jesus that they could find. Each one of them wanted to present Jesus in a particular way, so God used them to carefully select the material that would help them do that. This editing process can be seen most clearly in the Gospel of John. John says that if he had written down everything that Jesus did “even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written” (John 21:25). John explains why he selected some material for his Gospel.
rather than other stuff, “Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:30-31).

Matthew wrote his Gospel in order to convince Jews that Jesus was the promised Messiah. He presents Jesus as the King of the Jews. We can tell this because he constantly shows how Christ fulfilled Old Testament prophecies. He doesn’t explain Jewish customs, because his initial readers knew all about them anyway, and his genealogy traces the ancestry of Jesus back through King David to Abraham (Matthew 1:1-17).

Mark wrote his Gospel for Gentiles, most probably for some Romans. He presents Jesus as the Servant of the Lord who did His Father’s will. He keeps explaining Hebrew words because he knows his initial readers wouldn’t understand them. His Gospel contains less talking than the others, is shorter, and races from one incident to the next. One of its characteristics is that it keeps saying ‘immediately,’ as if to keep the action moving. This would have appealed to the Romans who were a bit like Americans in that they were more interested in action than in reading long speeches. Mark’s Gospel doesn’t contain a genealogy, since a servant doesn’t need to prove his ancestry. A servant’s worth is measured by what he does, not by his parentage.

Luke’s Gospel was written to Gentiles - most probably Greeks rather than Romans. It was dedicated to a particular individual called Theophilus, which means ‘one who loves God’. Luke says that its purpose was “so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:4). This means that it was not intended to evangelise those who had never
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heard of Jesus, but rather to strengthen the faith of those who had already received Christian instruction. Luke presents Jesus as the Son of Man. In fact, when we were looking earlier at how Jesus intended His salvation to reach the whole world, you may have noticed that most of the quotations came from Luke’s Gospel. This is because Luke deliberately selected those sayings of Jesus that would minister to Greeks and not just to Jews. Luke’s genealogy traces Jesus’ ancestry all the way back to Adam, the common ancestor of all mankind (Luke 3:23-38).

John’s Gospel was written to Gentiles and to Jews who lived in Greek cities. His Gospel is much more theological than the other three, and presents Jesus as the Son of God in a way that would be familiar and understandable to people used to hearing Greek philosophy and logic. John doesn’t give a genealogy of Jesus’ human descent, because he is much more interested in showing how Jesus is God the Son who eternally co-existed with God the Father and created the universe (John 1:1-3).

Acts and Revelation

Luke also wrote a sequel, or follow-up, to his Gospel. This was also addressed to Theophilus and traced how the message of Jesus continued to spread through the entire known world through the witness of Christ’s followers. We know this second book of Luke as the Book of Acts.

The last book of the Bible to be written was Revelation. This took place during the time when the character of persecution against the Christians was changing. Now the Romans, rather than the Jews, were increasingly becoming the persecutors. Revelation uses highly symbolic language, almost like a code, just like persecuted Christians have to do today in many parts of the world.
world. It speaks about how God will cast down the kingdoms of this world and how Christ and His Church will triumph over all the persecution and opposition. Because of its symbolic nature we often find Revelation to be one of the hardest books of the Bible to understand. Interestingly, some oppressive political regimes still try to prevent Christians from reading and teaching from the Book of Revelation because they recognise its power to encourage and inspire the persecuted Church.

So that's how all the different books of the New Testament came to be written. But now we get to a question that is often controversial. How did the Church decide which books were Scripture and which were not?

**The Canon of Scripture**

The first part of the answer to that question is easy and straightforward. When it came to the Old Testament, the Church simply took over the Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus had used. The 39 books that comprise our Old Testament match up with the Scriptures that were used in Palestine during the time of Christ's ministry. So, when Jesus refers to 'the Scripture' we know that these are the books He is referring to. There were some other Jewish books that were used in synagogues in the Greek speaking world outside Palestine, and these are sometimes known as the Apocrypha, or the Deuterocanonical books. You may find them today in some Catholic Bibles sandwiched between the Old and New Testaments. But most Christians, quite rightly, have understood that they were not part of the Old Testament that Jesus used. They may well be interesting, and of some spiritual benefit, but they are not Scripture.
How on Earth Did We End Up Here?

But what about the New Testament? There’s a modern myth, propagated by new age conspiracy theorists and by novels such as *The Da Vinci Code*, that goes something like this: “There were hundreds of Gospels and writings in the early Church, but a group of bishops met at the Council of Nicaea and promoted the books that suited them and then burnt all the rest.” That is, to be honest, unhistorical fantasy. The Council of Nicaea was about something else entirely and did not determine the Canon of Scripture. You wouldn’t base your knowledge of marine biology on a cartoon like ‘Finding Nemo’ - so it is baffling that some people will base their opinion of how the Canon of Scripture was formed on something they read in a novel.

Let’s look at what really happened. In the first two or three centuries of Church History there were an increasing number of Christian congregations scattered around the Middle East, Northern Africa, Europe and in parts of Asia. Some of the bigger churches, particularly in important cities, were more influential - just as today most Christians might be more influenced by the opinion of a mega-church pastor like Rick Warren than they would be by the pastor of a little storefront church. But everything was still done on a grassroots level, with no highly organised hierarchy. Many of the churches that were being established in Asia never acknowledged that the churches in Rome or Constantinople had any authority over them whatsoever. So it would have been impossible for any Bishop or Council to force them to choose any book of Scripture over another.

Each Christian congregation had to decide for itself which books and epistles were of value to them. The more valuable and helpful they reckoned a book to be, the more likely it was that
they would end up viewing that book as being Scripture - inspired by God in a similar way as the books of the Old Testament. This was not something that a Church Council could decree. This was an organic process - a survival of the fittest where only those books that really were inspired by God could gain acceptance among enough congregations to be considered part of the New Testament.

**Making the Cut**

There were several criteria that those early churches used to assess books:

1. Was the book apostolic in authorship? Was it written by an apostle, or by someone who was close enough to an apostle so as to reflect their teaching?

2. Was the book apostolic in content? If it was a Gospel, did its account of what Jesus said and did square with what the churches had heard from the lips of the apostles and other eye-witnesses? Was the teaching in the book consistent with what Jesus and the apostles had taught?

3. Was the book of value in that it did what Scripture is supposed to do? According to 2 Timothy 3:16, inspired Scripture will instruct, correct, rebuke and train in righteousness. Therefore, in order to be treasured by a local church as Scripture, a book would need to have that kind of effect on those who read it and heard it.

Gradually, when it came to books being used in those early churches, the cream rose to the top while any false Gospels or heretical books either faded away or ended up being confined to

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little splinter groups and cults. There is no mystery or conspiracy about this. Most of the non-Canonical books that archaeologists and historians have unearthed have been translated and are freely available online to be checked out by anyone with an internet connection and enough interest to actually look them up instead of swallowing tall tales from The Da Vinci Code. It is clear to any unbiased reader why they never made the cut.

Many of them were written at much later dates than the Canonical books. All the 27 books that make up our New Testament were written in the First Century, when eye-witnesses were still alive to confirm or deny their truthfulness. However, most of the other books were written much later, often a hundred years or more after all the eye-witnesses had died. Also, many of the non-Canonical books contain bizarre teachings that would contradict the words of Jesus or the teaching of the apostles. For example, some of them were written by Gnostics. These claimed that the Gospel could not be understood by most people, and so you had to join their exclusive little cult where you would receive a secret knowledge that nobody outside of that group possessed. Other books contained unbelievable fanciful stories. For example, one famous false Gospel speaks of a living, walking, talking Cross strolling forth from the tomb of Jesus!

So, in the end, it became clear which books were considered Scripture and which weren’t. This is not to suggest that every single local church always came up with the exact same list of books independently of each other. Some missed out a book or two, others got duped and included something spurious. Some books, such as the Four Gospels or Galatians, were recognised by everyone very early on to be Scripture. Others, such as 2 Peter and Revelation, took longer to be accepted. But gradually it
became pretty clear to everyone that there were 27 books that had gained broad acceptance across the vast majority of local churches.

Later Church Councils simply confirmed this grass roots process and ratified the Canon of Scripture as we know it. The Church Councils did not make any book Scripture - they just put their stamp of approval on what was happening in the local churches. The key thing, from our standpoint, is that this was another example of the Spirit moving in the entire Church. This was not a few people (a hierarchy) enforcing their decisions on the rest. It was numerous church members, each of whom had the Holy Spirit, moving together to produce something revolutionary that would be crucial to the future history of the Church - a new set of Christian Scriptures to stand alongside the Old Testament.

We mentioned earlier that being witnesses in the power of the Spirit would lead to two huge developments in the early Church. One was the Canon of Scripture. The other was defining a common body of Christian belief that could be referred to as ‘The Faith.’
How on Earth Did We End Up Here?
THE FAITH
(How We Ended Up with the Creed and the Trinity)

“I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7)

At first it all seemed very simple. You either followed Jesus or you didn’t. You were either a disciple or you weren’t. Peter’s preaching on the Day of Pentecost offered an uncomplicated message. Jesus Christ was the promised Son of David (the Messiah) who had been crucified, raised from the dead, and had ascended into heaven. The explanation of how to get saved was just as simple: Repent and be baptised for the forgiveness of sins. Then you received the Holy Spirit.

Even today you get some Christians who ask why we can’t just keep the Gospel that simple. Why can’t we just preach faith, repentance, baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit? Why do we need doctrines and Creeds and Statements of Faith?

The Need for Guidance

What we need to understand is that the Church didn’t go formulating doctrines because they were bored and didn’t have anything better to do. Generally speaking, they had to respond to attacks on the faith that came in the form of false teaching.
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Perhaps a simple illustration can help us understand the principle. You might as well ask why driving a car has to be so complicated. Why can’t we drive on whatever side of the road we feel like? Why have traffic signals and no parking zones? Why have speed limits? Why have laws against drunk driving?

It’s not that the inventors of the automobile immediately decided to invent a load of rules to go with their new technology. What happened was that problems would occur, and they had to pass laws to save lives. Drivers kept bumping into each other, so it made things safer to insist that everybody drove on the right (or in my country, on the left). Intersections were chaotic with nobody sure who had right of way, so someone invented traffic signals and laws about who has right of way (and, even with that, I still get totally confused at a four-way stop when driving in the United States, and my American friends get terrified by European roundabouts). Cars were parking anywhere they liked and blocking entire streets, so parking regulations had to be instituted. People driving too fast, or driving while intoxicated, kept killing themselves and others, so laws had to be passed to limit such dangerous behaviour.

The same thing kept happening in the early Church when it came to their beliefs and doctrines. Someone would come along with a false teaching of some description, and everyone else would scratch their heads and think, “Hang on a minute - that doesn’t sound right.” But explaining why it wasn’t right was sometimes harder than it looked. It’s hard to argue against what you don’t believe if you’ve never properly worked out what you do believe! We’ve already seen that Galatians was written as a response to false teachers who were trying to insist that Gentile converts to Christ should become Jews and get circumcised.
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Also, 1 and 2 Thessalonians were written because there were false teachings going around concerning the Second Coming of Christ. One of the most important passages of Scripture informing our understanding of the Resurrection, 1 Corinthians Chapter 15, was written because someone was denying the reality of the Resurrection. 2 Peter and Jude were both written to combat the influence of false teachers.

Docetism

Many of the earliest false teachings were misunderstandings about the nature of Christ. For example, Docetism taught that Jesus was not really human, but rather that he only seemed to be a man (the Greek word *dokeo* means ‘to seem’). We can see a reference to this in John’s epistles where acknowledging Christ as having come in the flesh distinguishes between a spirit that comes from God and the spirit of antichrist (1 John 4:1-3). The same writer also speaks of “deceivers who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh” (2 John 7).

The real problem for the Docetists was that the idea of Jesus doing normal everyday stuff didn’t fit in with their ideas of how God should behave. For example, they were horrified at the thought of Jesus going to the bathroom, so they invented a theory that His bodily waste evaporated odourlessly through His skin instead of via His bowels! Marcion famously and crudely derided orthodox Christians as believing that God almighty was born into a bag stuffed with excrement. We can still see traces of this kind of thinking in the second verse of the popular children’s Christmas Carol, Away in a Manger:

“The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes. But little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes.”
Think about those lines for a minute. Why wouldn’t the baby Jesus cry? Do we think it is sinful for babies to cry? If Jesus was a real human baby then He would have done what babies are supposed to do - He would have cried, burped and filled His diaper. (And the fact that a good many of you, as you read this, feel slightly uncomfortable or offended over that last sentence is a good indication that, even today, we all have a bit of a tendency towards Docetism!)

The Nature of Deception

One of the problems with false teachers in the First Century (just like false teachers in the Twenty-First Century) was that they didn’t immediately advertise their beliefs. They would join a congregation, get to know everybody and be trusted by everybody, and then their heresies would be much more devastating because they were coming from within the church rather than being an attack from outside. Gradually it became clear that it wasn’t enough for someone simply to call themselves a Christian - there had to be some way to tell if they had a genuine experience of Christ and held to the central beliefs as taught by the apostles.

For example, Paul encountered some disciples at Ephesus. He could have just accepted them at face value, but instead he quizzed them about their experience. It turned out that they had never even heard of the Holy Spirit! They had repented under the preaching of John the Baptist, but they were not yet genuine followers of Christ (Acts 19:1-4). Also, more than one New Testament scholar has suggested that the reason why Paul’s opponents in Galatia were fighting against the Gospel of grace was because they were not truly saved. Many Pharisees in
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Jerusalem had believed that Jesus was raised from the dead because of the overwhelming evidence for the Resurrection. But simply believing that a man was raised from the dead is no guarantee that they had truly repented or had received the Holy Spirit.

So gradually Christians began to produce summaries of what they considered to be essential beliefs. That is, in essence, what makes a Creed or a Declaration of Faith.

Creeds

Many New Testament scholars are pretty sure that they can detect the very earliest creeds in some New Testament passages. They show a different style to the rest of the epistle, often contain Aramaic words, and if translated back into Aramaic read like poetry. This would lead us to conclude that they were early creeds that were used in the Jerusalem Church before the common language of Christianity became Greek. Quite possibly they were set to music and used as hymns to aid memorisation.

For example: “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my Gospel” (2 Timothy 2:8). Or: “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

As the creeds developed they became more comprehensive. Let’s look at three early creeds, two of which are still recited in many churches today. Here are the Old Roman Creed, the Apostles’ Creed, and the Nicene Creed (starting with the oldest and finishing with the more recent).
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The Old Roman Creed
I believe in God the Father, Almighty:
And in Christ Jesus, His only Son, our Lord:
Who was born from the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary:
Who under Pontius Pilate was crucified and buried:
On the third day rose again from the dead:
Ascended into heaven, sits at the right hand of the Father:
Whence He will come to judge the living and the dead:
And in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Church, the remission of sins, the resurrection of the flesh (the life everlasting).

The Apostles’ Creed
I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth:
And in Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, our Lord:
Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary:
Suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead and buried:
He descended into hell:
The third day He rose again from the dead:
He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty:
From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead:
I believe in the Holy Ghost:
I believe in the holy catholic church: the communion of saints:
The forgiveness of sins:
The resurrection of the body:
And the life everlasting. Amen.
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The Nicene Creed
I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible; And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end. And I believe in the Holy Ghost the Lord, and Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father [and the Son]; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spake by the Prophets. And I believe one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church; I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

The Development of Doctrine

The most obvious difference between these creeds is how much longer, and more detailed, the later creeds have become. Such formulations of faith tend to develop and become more detailed over time. They never seem to get simplified. One reason
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for this is that false teachings never stop! I find it helpful to think of this as being similar to the modern problem of computer hackers and anti-virus software.

Somewhere in the world, right at this moment, some spotty teenager with a frighteningly high IQ is tapping away at a computer keyboard trying to work out a new way of hijacking your internet connection to either mess up all the files on your computer or to steal your personal information. Somewhere else in the world, right at this moment, some software designers (who used to be spotty teenagers) with similarly high IQs are tapping away at their computer keyboards working out ways to thwart that teenage hacker. If you have anti-virus software on your computer, then you will know that you need to continually download and install updates to ensure you are protected against the latest viruses and threats. Think of the developing creeds as being the early Church’s anti-virus software. As false teachers developed new threats that weren’t covered by the existing creeds, so the creeds had to be updated to meet each new danger.

Now, this is all very well so long as you trust the designers of your software to be acting in your best interests and to genuinely protect you. But what if that wasn’t the case? What if they wanted to ensure that your computer would only work with certain programs that they themselves had manufactured, rather than with those produced by their competitors? What if their ‘anti-virus’ software was secretly gathering your personal information so that its designers could target you to sell you stuff you didn’t really need?

And that is the concern of many people today. Are these creeds really just designed to sum up biblical truths and to refute false teachings? What if the conspiracy theorists are right? What if
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these creeds were the hierarchy’s way of sneaking in their own ideas?

The best way to answer those questions is to look at how the creeds, and the faith of the Church, developed in response to the biggest area of false teachings in early Christianity - the Person and Nature of Christ.

Christology

The New Testament makes some clear statements about God and about Jesus. They can be summed up as follows:

1. There is only one God.
2. Jesus Christ is God.
3. Jesus Christ was a man.
4. The Holy Spirit is God.
5. Jesus Christ is not God the Father.
6. Jesus Christ is not the Holy Spirit.
7. The Holy Spirit is not God the Father.

The early Christians evidently believed each of these truths, otherwise they would never have accepted the books that support each truth as part of Scripture. Like most of us they didn’t worry too much about precisely how they all fitted together.

But then false teachers came along and began to stress one of these truths in such a way that it contradicted some of the other truths. For example, Tritheism (belief in three gods) fitted in with truths #2 to #7, but contradicted truth #1.

Modalism was an early false teaching that said God used different names to describe Himself when He was operating in different ways, or different modes. This would be similar to how water can appear as ice or steam depending on the circumstances. So, according to the modalists, God was the Father when He was
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giving the commandments to Moses, was the Son when He died on the Cross, and was the Spirit when He filled the believers on the Day of Pentecost. That fitted in with truths #1 to #4, but contradicted #5 to #7.

Adoptionism taught that Jesus started out as just a man, but His obedience was so perfect that He was adopted by the Father and became divine. That contradicts truth #2, because God is eternal. If Jesus only became divine at His baptism then He wasn't eternal, in which case He couldn't be God.

Arianism

The most serious heresy, and one that caused a long struggle in early Christianity, was something called Arianism. Arius was an Egyptian priest who lived 250 years after Christ. He taught that Jesus was a god (small g) but not God (capital G). According to Arianism, Christ existed before He was incarnated in Mary's womb, but only as a created being. He did not exist from all Eternity. This is very similar to the teaching of groups like Jehovah's Witnesses today. Obviously it also contradicted truth #2 by denying that Jesus was God.

Only after many years of controversy were Arius' teachings condemned by Church leaders. Modern day conspiracy theorists would like us to believe that this was some political move by the powers of the day - but the truth is that Arius actually received strong support from successive emperors. The Christian Church rejected his theories, despite strong political pressure, because Arius was not in line with the clear teachings of Jesus and the apostles as recorded in the New Testament books. Arius himself died in rather lurid fashion, as recorded gleefully by his critics. On his way to the Forum in Constantinople, he was suddenly seized...
by stomach cramps. Squatting behind a pillar to relieve himself, his intestines dropped out from his body and so he died!14

Eventually it became clear that it wasn’t enough for the leaders of the Church to keep entering into long debates with each false teacher on this subject, or indeed that they could hope for every heretic to expire quite as dramatically as Arius. They had to sum up the biblical teaching in a way that most Christians could easily memorise it. That way, ordinary believers would be able to recognise false teachers for themselves.

The Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity is the best way that anyone has ever managed to explain all of the seven biblical truths that we listed earlier. It teaches that there is one God, but three Persons within that Godhead. These three Persons are distinct from one another, but cannot be divided. Jesus Christ, as the second Person of the Trinity, is both fully God but also fully human.

Now, it is perfectly true that the word ‘Trinity’ is not found in the Bible. But it is equally true that all the different truths that make up the Trinity doctrine are to be found in the Bible. So, the doctrine of the Trinity, as part of the Christian faith, is not something that has been added to the Gospel. Rather we should see it as drawing out what was already in the Bible in order to expose false teachings.

Indeed, to quote noted New Testament scholar N.T. Wright, “Although the writers of the New Testament did not themselves formulate the doctrine of the Trinity, they bequeathed to their successors a manner of speaking and writing about God which made it, or something very like it, almost inevitable.”15
So, as the early Church continued to spread throughout the world and to preach the Gospel in the power of the Spirit, they came to agree on a common Book and a common Faith. This was a result of being Christ’s witnesses.
REVIEW OF BOOK ONE

(SEEDS THAT WOULD SHATTER CONCRETE)

Remember, this is not some Church History course to help you pass an exam and then forget it all. The whole point of reading all this stuff is to understand how on earth we ended up here!

Christ said, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). This statement contained powerful seeds that were to take a group of excited Jews who had witnessed a man rise from the dead, and would shatter the concrete of their religion, their culture, and their geography.

The Holy Spirit was going to lead them to places they had never imagined. The permanent presence of God was going to spread to every believer rather than being confined to just a few special people on a few special occasions. This means that Christians today can experience God for themselves, and can expect God to work in our lives.

The Gospel was going to extend to the whole world, not just to the Jews. If it wasn’t for this, then the vast majority of you who are reading this book would never have had an opportunity to be a part of the Christian Church. If, by some miracle, you
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wanted to find about God, then you would have had to get circumcised, learn Hebrew and make regular trips to Jerusalem.

The witness of the Church was going to produce a new set of Scriptures, the New Testament, so we can easily discover the truth about Jesus, and the way of salvation, by opening a Bible and reading it for ourselves.

The witness of the Church was also going to produce a common faith, or a summary of the beliefs that mark us out as followers of Jesus Christ. This gives us the confidence to know that we are on the right track and that we can recognise and guard ourselves against false teachers.

Without these developments in the early years of the Church’s history, it is certain that the Church would look nothing like it does today. Indeed, without these developments it is unlikely that there would be a Christian Church at all.

Recommended Further Reading


The Canon of Scripture by F.F. Bruce (IVP Academic, 1988). Too many people have swallowed unhistorical twaddle about ‘other Gospels’ due to the influence of books such as ‘The Da Vinci Code.’ F.F. Bruce’s classic little book brings a wealth of common sense and historical accuracy.
Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth by Alister McGrath (HarperOne, 2009). Alister McGrath, a fellow Irishman, does a masterful job of explaining the causes and effects of heresy, and how the Church responded to it.
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BOOK TWO

CONCRETE THAT WOULD SMOTHER GROWTH

“An enemy did this” (Matthew 13:28)

Book One was inspiring because we saw how the truth that was contained in the Word of Christ would break through seemingly impregnable barriers of history, culture and tradition. If it could be compared to seeds pushing their way through concrete, then Book Two is like describing how someone dumped a fresh truck load of concrete over a beautiful garden.

Sometimes it seems as if our greatest triumphs are followed by our hardest falls. After standing on the mountaintop you descend back into the valley.

Elijah’s mountaintop experience was when he confronted 850 false prophets on Mount Carmel and turned the heart of an entire nation back to God (1 Kings 18:16-46). Yet in the very next Chapter we read about him turning tail, running from Jezebel’s threats, and wishing that he were dead (1 Kings 19:1-4).

Jesus stood on the Mount of Transfiguration, talked with Moses and Elijah, and heard the voice of His Father speak audibly to Him (Mark 9:2-8). Yet immediately afterwards He descended into the valley and was confronted with the abject failure of His disciples to operate in faith as He had taught them (Mark 9:14-19).
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And the Church of Jesus Christ, having been built by the power of the Spirit on a solid foundation of the Word of God and sound doctrine, somehow contrived to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. In this next section we will see how the Church’s leadership, after starting well, made a massive miscalculation and allied themselves with worldly wealth and power. It is a painful story to read. The children of light took the world headlong into the Dark Ages. But read it we must if we are to understand how on earth we ended up where we are now!
FROM A PERSECUTED MINORITY TO A PERSECUTING MAJORITY
(How We Ended Up with the Idea of Christian Countries)

“At first, most of the persecution that was faced by Christians came from the Jews. In the Book of Acts, for example, we see the Roman authorities acting as the rescuers, taking Paul into protective custody when a Jewish mob was about to lynch him (Acts 22:22-29). But gradually things changed and the Romans took over the primary role in persecuting this new Christian faith. What immediately springs to mind when we hear the word ‘persecution?’ We think of Christians being fed to the lions in a crowded Colosseum. We imagine believers meeting in secret in the catacombs and identifying each other with secret symbols. And that is certainly part of the story - but it wasn’t all like that.

Uneven Persecution

In recent years I’ve had the immense privilege of meeting Christians from the underground churches in China, including some who have been imprisoned and tortured for their faith. One of the striking things is how patchy and inconsistent the
persecution is. In some regions you can see unregistered churches operating quite openly, even constructing buildings. Yet in other areas church meetings are raided by the police at every opportunity. A season of relative tolerance may be followed by a season of harsh crackdowns with multiple arrests. Often policies depend upon the whims of local officials.

That’s how persecution tends to operate. Most regimes and societies lack the terrifying efficiency and discipline to implement anything as comprehensive as the Nazi Holocaust. So, in the first two or three centuries of the Church’s existence, Roman persecution of believers varied in intensity depending on political circumstances and geographical location. At times Christians had relative freedom to practice their faith - at other times they faced torture and death.

**Reasons for Persecution**

There were at least five reasons why Christianity attracted persecution in the Roman Empire:

1. Its growth threatened existing religions and commercial interests. Early examples of this can be seen in the imprisonment of Paul and Silas in Philippi (Acts 16:16-40) and the riot instigated by idol-makers in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-41).

2. Many Romans believed that showing the correct respect to the old Roman gods was essential if Rome was to continue to prosper as an Imperial power. If they abandoned the old gods, they thought, then bad things would happen. They were quite happy to worship additional new deities as well as Jupiter and Juno, but Christianity was an exclusive faith that
required its followers to renounce all other gods. Therefore, the Christians tended to become scapegoats for anything bad that happened in the Empire. Tertullian, a key early Christian leader and thinker, said, “If the Tiber floods the city, or if the Nile refuses to rise, or if the sky withholds its rain, if there is an earthquake, a famine, a pestilence, at once the cry is raised: ‘Christians to the lions!’”

3. There has always been a tendency, all other things being equal, for converts to Christianity to prosper financially. This sociological phenomenon, known as ‘redemption lift,’ is a natural result of seeing work as a means of glorifying God, of abstaining from wasteful habits such as drunkenness or gambling, and of building a reputation for trustworthiness. Therefore, it is understandable that some individual Christians in the Roman Empire became quite wealthy. As they gave donations to their churches, so some congregations also became wealthy. This made them targets for greedy rulers who could condemn them for religious reasons and then seize their assets.

4. Roman Emperors tended to demand political loyalty by declaring themselves to be divine. For example, the Emperor Decius, in 250 AD, ordered all Roman citizens to offer a sacrifice to him. This involved standing in the presence of local officials, dropping a pinch of incense into the sacrificial flames, and declaring, “Caesar is Lord!” Obviously for Christians, who believed that Jesus is Lord, this would be considered idolatry. Decius died only a year after
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initiating this policy, but many Christians, including the bishops of Rome, Jerusalem and Antioch, were executed for refusing to offer this sacrifice to the Emperor.

5. A fifth reason for persecution was the strong stand that the early Christian Church took against the shedding of human blood. Not only was murder forbidden, but also the taking of human life in warfare or through judicial capital punishment. Therefore, Christians were forbidden by their own spiritual leaders from joining the army or taking positions as government officials. Those who already held such positions, and then converted to Christianity, were expected to resign. According to the Roman authorities, for a soldier to desert his post was a crime punishable by death. It undermined the military discipline that held the Empire together. Therefore, many such converts were killed.

Martyrs for Jesus

The first Emperor to launch a systematic persecution of Christians was Nero, whom many historians think was quite possibly insane. In 64 AD the city of Rome was devastated by a huge fire. At the time many people believed that Nero had started the fire himself. However, he used the Christians as a scapegoat and pinned the blame on them. Thousands of Christians were killed in the cruelest ways imaginable. Some were crucified, and others were beheaded or forced to wear the tunica molesta (a shirt soaked in flammable liquids which was then set alight). Church
From a Persecuted Minority to a Persecuting Majority

tradition records that it was during this persecution that both Peter and Paul were executed.¹⁸

Many believers were killed in the public arena for the amusement of the crowds. Some were wrapped in wild animal skins and then torn to pieces by packs of dogs. Others were fed to hungry lions. When it began to get dark, then more Christians were covered with pitch, tied to posts, and burnt alive to serve as torches so the ‘entertainment’ could continue long into the night.

If such persecution, under Nero and subsequent Emperors, was intended to halt the spread of Christianity then it was an utter failure. The courage of the Christians, and their willingness to die for their beliefs, impressed many Romans. Tertullian coined the phrase “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.”¹⁹

The Seed of the Church

One famous example of how the policy of persecution backfired on the Romans was the martyrdom of a young Christian mother, Perpetua, and a female slave called Felicitas. Their deaths in Carthage, as recorded by Tertullian, inspired many others to become Christians. After refusing to renounce their faith they were flogged. Then the lady and the slave stood together, hand in hand, to face wild beasts. After the women were badly gored a swordsman was ordered to finish the execution. “But Perpetua, that she might have some taste of pain, was pierced between the bones and shrieked out; and when the swordsman's hand wandered still (for he was a novice), herself set it upon her own neck. Perchance so great a woman could not else have been slain had she not herself so willed it.”²⁰

Another famous martyrdom was that of Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna. An eye-witness account records that the Roman
proconsul urged the aged Bishop to deny his faith. Polycarp replied, “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?”

A succession of Emperors continued to persecute the Church. The last in this line, Diocletian, is estimated to have killed as many as 100,000 Christians. Yet the Church continued to grow, becoming so numerous as to be a force that had to be reckoned with in the Roman Empire. Rodney Stark, a sociologist of religion, has demonstrated convincingly that the faith spread primarily in the major cities of the Empire through personal witness to social networks of friends, family and colleagues.

**Exponential Growth**

This last point is important, because many Christians imagine that the growth of Christianity in its first three or four centuries (from a handful of believers to becoming the majority faith of the Roman Empire) must have happened through great revivals with thousands of converts receiving Christ at a time. But all the evidence suggests that these great events (such as 3000 getting saved under Peter’s preaching on the Day of Pentecost) were the exception rather than the norm. This is because most of us misunderstand and underestimate the power of exponential growth.

Perhaps the best illustration of exponential growth is the old legend about the philosopher in India who invented the game of chess. The King was so impressed that he allowed him to choose his own reward. The philosopher surprised the King by setting a chess board in front of the throne, and asking for one grain of rice on the first square, two grains on the second square, four,
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grains on the third square, eight on the fourth square and so on – each square having double the number of grains of the previous one. The King readily agreed and asked for the rice to be brought. All went well at first, but exponential growth saw the numbers increase so that there had to be a million grains on the 21st square, more than a trillion on the 41st, and the last square would have required a pile of rice larger than Mount Everest!23

In the same way, for Christianity to grow from 3,120 believers on the Day of Pentecost to the point where it became the majority faith of the Roman Empire, only required an average growth rate of about 3% a year. This supports the view that personal witness, rather than miraculous mass conversions, powered the rise of the Church.

We’ve mentioned that Diocletian was the last in a succession of persecuting Emperors. But all that was about to change through the next man to sit on the Imperial throne - a character called Constantine.

Constantine

Constantine was fighting against Maxentius for the right to be the next Emperor. The key battle took place in 312 AD at Milvian Bridge, just north of Rome at the Tiber River. The night before the battle, Constantine had a dream in which he saw a cross in the sky and heard the words, “In this sign you will conquer.”24 The next day his troops won a famous victory and his rival, Maxentius, drowned while trying to flee across the river.

Within six months of taking the Imperial throne in Rome, Constantine passed the Edict of Milan. This declared that followers of all religions, including Christians, were to be free to practice their religion. Not only that, all property that had been
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confiscated from churches in earlier persecutions was now to be returned to them. It is hard for us to imagine how, after centuries of persecution, this new toleration must have seemed like the greatest blessing that Christians could have imagined. Think of the collapse of the Berlin Wall in Eastern Europe, or the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa. Now multiply that excitement a hundredfold and you might have some idea of the impact of the Edict of Milan.

But, as if that wasn’t already incredible enough, more amazing rumours began to be heard. The story was now that the Emperor had become a Christian! Constantine began to involve himself more and more in the business of the Church. He supported the Church financially, exempted clergy from taxes, sponsored the construction of church buildings, and promoted Christians to high office. He summoned Church Councils to sort out doctrinal disputes and even led a ‘Christian’ army to wage war against a group called the Donatists that were considered to be heretics.

We would do well to question whether Constantine had really experienced anything that even remotely resembled the faith and repentance that is necessary to become a new creation in Christ. The triumphal arch he built to celebrate his victory at Milvian Bridge was decorated with images of pagan gods and goddesses. His own life was so characterised by bloodshed that he delayed getting baptised until he was on his deathbed, in the mistaken belief that this act would absolve him for his sins. He had his own wife, his son, and his father-in-law murdered. But none of this stopped him from showering favours on the Church.
From a Persecuted Minority to a Persecuting Majority

A Colossal Mistake

At first, for the Church’s leaders, this seemed like a win/win situation. After centuries of persecution, they now had friends in high places. After years of having their assets confiscated, they now had an abundance of financial resources to fund the preaching of the Gospel. After being looked down upon and despised, they now had an input into important matters of State that affected the whole Empire. It must have seemed as if Christianity was entering a new golden age.

But today most perceptive students of Church History can see that Constantine’s patronage of the Church was the worst thing that could possibly have happened for the Christian faith. What Satan could not destroy by persecution, he corrupted with political power. The Roman State and the Church had become entwined, and the two began to look more and more like each other. Senior clergy began to wear gold and scarlet robes and to gather great wealth. They even became known as ‘princes of the Church.’ Constantine mixed many of the symbols and practices of his old religion (Sol Invictus – the sun god) with those of Christianity. The faith that had encouraged its followers to endure martyrdom rather than to shed blood on the battlefield now waged wars against those with whom they disagreed. It is frightening to realise that it took less than ten years from the end of the Diocletian persecution until the Church was itself persecuting those that it deemed to be heretics.

A marginalised and despised, but spiritually powerful, faith had been hijacked and bastardised into a politically and financially hungry ecclesiastical machine. The persecuted minority had become the persecuting majority. As if that wasn’t bad enough, Constantine’s intervention had spawned something that was to
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pervert the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the next 1700 years or more. It was a heady mix of religion and power known as Christendom.
CHRISTENDOM AND THE TWISTING OF CHRISTIANITY
(How We Ended Up with Medieval Catholicism)

“By their fruit you will recognise them” (Matthew 7:20)

‘Christianity’ and ‘Christendom.’ Rarely do you find two words that sound so similar yet are so far apart in meaning. Yet, as a result of the Church accepting Constantine’s offer of political power, many of us often struggle to separate the two ideas in our heads.

Sitting in the Seat of Caesar

Christianity is a faith concept. It refers to those who worship Jesus Christ, seek to follow Him, and try to order their lives according to His teaching. Christendom is a social and cultural concept. It refers to those who seek to impose their ideas of Jesus Christ upon society and so to create a ‘Christian nation.’

You become part of Christianity by accepting the truth of the Gospel and choosing to follow Jesus Christ as your Lord. You become part of Christendom by being born in a ‘Christian country’ as opposed to a Hindu country or a Muslim country.
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In Christianity you choose to make your decisions about lifestyle and personal morality in accordance with your understanding of the teachings of Jesus and the Bible. In Christendom you pass laws that force believers and unbelievers alike to live the lifestyle and morality that you feel is right.

Christianity often exists as a counterculture, refusing to follow the trends of popular culture and encouraging the Church to act as a prophetic voice to call people to something more biblical and authentic. Christendom is the dominant culture, where the Church calls the shots in society.

The Edict of Milan had promised tolerance to all religions, but that was soon to change. The next step, taken by Emperor Theodosius in 380 AD, was to make Christianity the ‘official religion’ of the Roman Empire. The Edict of Thessalonica ordered all subjects of the Empire to conform to the teachings of the Bishops of Rome and Alexandria. In rather ominous tones it declared:

“We authorise the followers of this law to assume the title of Catholic Christians; but as for the others, since, in our judgment they are foolish madmen, we decree that they shall be branded with the ignominious name of heretics, and shall not presume to give to their conventicles the name of churches. They will suffer in the first place the chastisement of the divine condemnation and in the second the punishment of our authority which in accordance with the will of Heaven we shall decide to inflict.”

After that, pagan practices, including sacrifices and divination, were banned. Pagan temples were demolished and churches were built in their place. Since the Empire was now officially Christian, it became important that all the inhabitants should be Christians. This was going to be difficult if the Church kept following the
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biblical practice of encouraging people to become Christians by preaching the Gospel to them and hoping that they would respond and thus be born again. As Tertullian had said, “fiunt, non nascentur, Christiani,” (people are made, not born, Christians). Obviously, if the Empire was really to be a Christian Empire, they had to find a way to make sure that everyone was a Christian.

Infant Baptism

The answer to this was right under their noses - infant baptism. According to the Book of Acts and other early Christian literature, baptism was originally for believers. You received Christ by faith, and then you publicly demonstrated that faith by getting baptised. However, some converts, wanting to make clear that their entire families were going to follow Christ, had started bringing their very young children to be baptised with them. It’s not hard to see how this practice, which some Christian leaders had tolerated, could be adapted to suit the needs of a ‘Christian Empire.’ All the Church had to do was to make infant baptism the norm, rather than the exception. If it became standard practice to baptise everyone when they were babies, then you could argue that they were all Christians.

This is a graphic example of how Christendom eats away at the very core of true Christianity. A pragmatic political decision (making sure that the Empire was officially Christian) very quickly affected the most important issue that the Church can ever face - that of how we are saved. The Bible (and Christianity) is very clear on this. “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9). But now, under
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Christendom, they were saying that what made you a Christian was getting baptised as a baby. In other words, the biblical way of salvation had been replaced by a man-made ceremony. So, less than 50 years after Christianity was declared to be the official religion of the Empire, we find Augustine (who was himself only baptised at the age of 33) writing, “No one becomes a member of Christ except it be either by baptism in Christ, or death for Christ.” This is what we call ‘baptismal regeneration’ - the idea that you are born again by being baptised rather than by faith.

But the Church still had a problem. How could they persuade ordinary Christians to adopt this new measure of infant baptism? Why should Christians all start baptising their babies when everyone knew that this had not been required before by the Church, and even key Bishops such as Gregory of Nyassa and Augustine had not got baptised until they were adults?

Original Sin

Again, the solution was there under their noses. The Church had always taught the biblical doctrine of Original Sin - that all human beings since Adam and Eve are born with an inherited tendency towards committing sin. You could think of this as being like an automobile where the steering is unbalanced and pulls the vehicle to the right. If you concentrate hard enough then you can keep the vehicle on the road, but sooner or later you lose concentration or fall asleep and the car ends up in a ditch by the side of the road. That's why the Bible says, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Original sin, in its New Testament sense, is an inward bent towards sin that means we all end up in the ditch and need to be saved.
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But, the most natural thing in the world is for parents to worry about their children. Remember that in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries the rates of infant mortality were frighteningly high. A quarter of all babies did not survive their first year, and up to half of all children would die before the age of ten. Imagine if it were possible to convince Christian parents that their children needed to be baptised, otherwise they would suffer damnation. Then everyone would get their babies baptised, legitimising the idea of a ‘Christian Empire,’ because not to do so would make you a bad parent who had condemned your own baby to an unimaginable torment after death!

Therefore, the idea of Original Sin was twisted, and again Augustine is the main culprit here, to mean something entirely different from what it had meant for the previous three and a half centuries. Now, in Augustine’s version, it was not enough to say that we inherit an inward bent towards sin. Instead he taught that babies actually carry the stain and the guilt of Adam’s sin, and therefore, at the very moment of our birth, we deserve to be punished and desperately need to be saved. To use our automobile analogy once more – it’s not that the car pulls us towards the ditch, but rather that the car is in the ditch right at the beginning!

This, once more, was a radical reinterpretation of Christian teaching. After all, Jesus had said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in My name welcomes Me” (Matthew 18:3-5). But now the new Christendom teaching was that babies were inherently evil and guilty, and as such they had
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to be saved as quickly as possible in case they died in that guilt. And how were these guilty little newborn sinners to be saved? You’ve guessed it! By being baptised.

Augustine summed it all up pretty clearly, not only arguing that babies are guilty of Adam’s sin, but also claiming that if you don’t agree with his new version of Original Sin then you are a heretic who has deliberately departed from the faith:

*Even an infant, therefore, must be imbued with the sacrament of regeneration, lest without it his would be an unhappy exit out of this life; and this baptism is not administered except for the remission of sins. And so much does Christ show us in this very passage; for when asked, How could such things be? He reminded His questioner of what Moses did when he lifted up the serpent. Inasmuch, then, as infants are by the sacrament of baptism conformed to the death of Christ, it must be admitted that they are also freed from the serpent’s poisonous bite, unless we wilfully wander from the rule of the Christian faith. This bite, however, they did not receive in their own actual life, but in him on whom the wound was primarily inflicted.* (On Forgiveness of Sin, and Baptism, 43:27)

A House of Cards

The reason I’ve gone into this particular example in such detail is so we can see how effectively the different innovations of Christendom supported one another. You would be very hard pressed to find biblical justification for a Christian Empire, for infant baptism, for baptismal regeneration, or for the idea of babies being born already guilty of somebody else’s sin. But when you put them all together they support one another splendidly — like a house of cards. Now, add to that mix an Emperor who is prepared to lead a ‘Christian army’ against anyone who questions
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this house of cards, and within a few generations all these Christendom ideas became so widely accepted, that no-one would have believed anyone who tried to tell them that the Church had ever done things any other way.

There were a number of other great changes that occurred in the Church with the development of Christendom under Constantine and his successors. For a more comprehensive and in-depth treatment, I recommend Stuart Murray’s excellent book, to which this Chapter is indebted, Post-Christendom, published in the UK by Paternoster Press. In the rest of this Chapter we can only look at a few of them briefly.

The Sabbath

The very first Christians, all being Jews, had observed Saturday (the seventh day of the week) as the Sabbath day. But later Christians, once they had embraced Gentiles into the Church and broken away from Judaism, did not observe a Sabbath day. Indeed, the apostle Paul was very clear about this, “Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ” (Colossians 2:16,17).

The early Christians chose to worship on the first day of the week (Sunday) because that was the day of the week on which Jesus had been raised from the dead, and also the day that the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost. But there is no evidence that they ever treated it as a Sabbath day or tried to restrict people from working on that day.
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But Roman pagans had also designated the first day of the week in honour of Sol Invictus, the sun-god (hence we get the name ‘Sun-Day’). In 321 AD Constantine declared Sunday, or what he called ‘the venerable day of the sun’ to be an official day of rest. All markets, workshops and public offices were to be closed. This was a convenient merger of Christianity with pagan practices. It didn’t take long for this new day of rest to be called ‘the Sabbath’. In 364 AD the Council of Laodicea explicitly ordered Christians to treat Sunday as a day of rest equivalent to the Jewish Sabbath.29

Coercion

Now that the Church approved of, and even participated in, violence against heretics and unbelievers, the old prohibitions against taking human life were quietly discarded. In previous generations Christians had been prepared to die for the sake of the Cross. Now they were prepared to kill other people for the sake of the Cross. Once again we find our old friend Augustine providing a theological justification for this violence. After all, he argued, did not Jesus Himself tell a parable where people were to “go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full” (Luke 14:23)?30

The State and the Church increasingly became mirror images of each other. Both sets of leaders dressed in fancy robes, participated in elaborate rituals, amassed great wealth, and demanded unquestioning obedience from their followers. A faith that used to worship in people’s homes or in caves, now built for itself massive basilicas that rivalled the royal palaces and pagan monuments in their splendour and impressiveness. Of course these buildings had to be paid for, but that problem was easily
solved. After all, if the State could rely on taxing its subjects then why couldn’t the Church? And, since everybody in the Empire was now, by definition, a Christian, that meant that everyone would have to pay taxes to the Church. So tithing was enforced, not as a voluntary matter of conscience or of freewill giving, but as a tax - with all the power of the State waiting to imprison anyone who failed to pay their tithes.

The Priesthood

One of the earliest casualties of Christendom was the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. In the early Church, every believer was also a minister who had the right to approach God directly through Jesus Christ. In contrast with pagan religions, and even Judaism, where devotees had to go through a priest as an intermediary, Christians boldly declared that there was “one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5). This is why, in the New Testament, there is no hint of a separate priesthood within Christianity, or any clergy/laity distinction. Some believers were indeed empowered by the Spirit to act in leadership roles - such as apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor/teachers. But the emphasis was that they were to equip the rest of the Church for the work of the ministry, not that they were to perform ministry for the rest of the Church (Ephesians 4:11,12).

Even before Constantine some Christian leaders had taken to calling themselves ‘priests.’ But under Christendom this process accelerated dramatically. The role of the pastor/teacher was still recognised – but the other ministry offices to all intent and purposes disappeared. An apostle was now seen as some long dead figure from whom the Church hierarchy claimed to have
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received their authority. Prophets have an inconvenient habit of criticising the powerful, hypocrisy and institutions - so the last thing a Church/State establishment would have wanted would have been any prophets! As for evangelists - what use are evangelists when everybody in the Empire is already a Christian?

As for the clergy/laity divide, that was inevitable. Once you had accepted the argument that everybody in the Empire was a Christian, then you could hardly claim that every single inhabitant of the Empire was also a minister, could you? That would mean that every prostitute or pickpocket was also a Christian minister! Therefore, a system had to be set up where certain authorised individuals (clergy - literally ‘learned men’) did ministry and the rest of the population (laity - literally ‘the people’) got ministered to.

The clergy/laity divide also finished off any exercise of the charismatic and miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit. This had been slowly happening anyway, as Church worship became less of an opportunity to express thanks and worship to God for one's salvation, and more of a cultural and social event that everybody was obliged to attend. But the exercise of supernatural gifts, as they are freely given by the Holy Spirit to whomever He wishes, was plainly incompatible with a carefully structured religious hierarchy, where people knew their place in the pecking order and obeyed those who were above them.

In the Roman Republic (before there were Emperors) the highest position in paganism was the Pontifex Maximus (chief mediator) who presided over the other pagan high priests who were known as the College of Pontiffs. Each Emperor, from Caesar Augustus through to Gratian (died 383 AD), also used the title. Early Christians saw this title as extremely arrogant and
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blasphemous. In fact in 220 AD Tertullian, in a bitter argument with Callixtus, Bishop of Rome, accused him of acting high-handedly like a Roman Emperor and sarcastically called him the ‘Pontifex Maximus’ - a grievous insult.31

Yet, a century after Emperor Gratian relinquished the title, we find another Bishop of Rome (now preferring to be addressed as the papa, or Pope, rather than as a Bishop) declaring himself to be the new Pontifex Maximus. It would not be for another 600 years that the Pontifex Maximus would resurrect another pagan title and start calling his fellow pontiffs the College of Cardinals.

Within 450 years of Christ dying upon the Cross, the Church had become unrecognisable. Christianity had been replaced by Christendom. The movement that had survived persecution by Jews, pagans and Romans now looked like a hideous combination of all the worst characteristics of Judaism, paganism and the Empire. Politically it had become all-powerful, but spiritually it had fallen a remarkably long way in a very short period of time.

Casualties of Christendom

In a tragic footnote of history, some of those who suffered the most as a consequence of Christendom were actually those who didn’t even live in the Roman Empire. There had been Christians in Persia since the First Century, where they had enjoyed a good measure of toleration. However, once the Roman Empire declared itself to be officially ‘Christian’ things changed dramatically. Now the Persian Christians were viewed as potential traitors. A great persecution ensued with hundreds of Persian believers being martyred.32

In an even crueler irony, Christians in the territory that was once part of the Persian Empire (including modern-day Iran,
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Afghanistan, and parts of Pakistan, Kuwait, Iraq, Chechnya, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia) are facing persecution today for the exact same reasons. Since the US is perceived by many to be ‘a Christian country’ - a claim often made by American Christian leaders - then that marks out Christians in the Middle East as potential traitors and targets for every militant who wants to strike against America. Christendom is still claiming its innocent victims over sixteen centuries later.

If we want a graphic illustration of how different Christendom is to true Christianity, then we need look no further than the shameful events that occurred in the city of Alexandria in 415 AD. Hypatia was the daughter of a famous mathematician in the city’s Museum. She was renowned for both her beauty and her intelligence, being acknowledged as an authority in philosophy, astronomy, mathematics and music. As a pagan, she was already viewed with suspicion by Cyril, the Patriarch of Alexandria. But this suspicion turned to downright hatred when Hypatia supported Orestes, the city’s governor in a dispute with Cyril. During a particularly nasty outbreak of anti-Semitism, Cyril demanded that the entire Jewish population of Alexandria should be expelled. Orestes refused, and Hypatia supported his decision. In March 415 AD, during Lent, a mob of ‘Christians’ – spurred on by inflammatory preaching – dragged Hypatia from her chariot as she was riding home wearing her customary philosopher’s cloak. They took her to a church building, stripped her naked, and flayed her alive (tearing her skin off in strips with pieces of broken pottery). Then her corpse was dragged through the streets, taken outside the city, and burnt. According to the Suda (a 10th Century Byzantine encyclopaedia) all of this was at the instigation of Cyril.33
Today St. Cyril is honoured as a Father and Doctor of the Church. His feast day is celebrated by the Eastern Orthodox Church on the 9th of June, and on the 27th of June by the Coptic Church, the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church. Such are the ways of Christendom.
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THE DESCENT INTO DARKNESS
(How We Ended Up in the Dark Ages)

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer fit for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men” (Matthew 5:13)

Jesus prayed that His disciples would be in the world, but not of the world (John 17:15-16). All too often, however, the Church has struggled to maintain this balance. It has sometimes withdrawn from society (forgetting to be in the world) and sometimes has conformed to society (forgetting that it should not be of the world). For the next thousand years after the establishing of Christendom the Church continued to commit at least one of these two errors, and sometimes both at the same time. To maintain the balance desired by God requires the direction of the Holy Spirit, but the Church had chosen a path where it would be led by men - even if some of them were exceptionally intelligent and talented men.

There were four men who came to be recognised as so influential that they were known as ‘The Four Great Doctors of the Western Church.’ They were Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome and Gregory.
**Augustine**

We’ve already met Augustine a few times in the last Chapter. He was one of the key figures in providing theological legitimisation for the concept of Christendom, and in developing the new institution that would become what we know today as Roman Catholicism. It would be no exaggeration to say that, after Paul, he was the most influential figure in the first 1,000 years of the Christian Church.

He was born in what is now modern-day Algeria in 354 AD and in his youth got involved with a cult called the Manichees. The Manichees were a Gnostic sect. Remember the Gnostics from Chapter Three? They were the people who claimed that they, and they alone, had the secret knowledge that people needed to truly understand the Gospel. The Manichees were also dualists, meaning that they believed in two competing gods. They taught that the God of the Bible was not all-powerful and so was locked into a continual struggle with Satan, who was also a god.

Augustine was extremely intelligent and gifted, and rose to become a professor of rhetoric at Carthage (the centre of North African culture and learning). He converted to Christianity at about 30 years old, and lived to his mid-70s. He rose to become a Bishop and a Doctor of the Church and many of his writings and insights still impact Christianity today - for good and for evil.

He taught that human history had passed through six ages, but that that the Church age was the seventh age when Christianity would come to dominate the world. It is easy to see why Augustine supported the idea of Christendom so enthusiastically, and why he was prepared to advocate violence against heretics. They were not just challenging the status quo - in
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Augustine’s mind they were threatening the very purpose for which God had established the Church.

Just War Theory

Augustine’s search for theological support for violence in certain circumstances produced something called the Just War Theory. This is still used by most people today when they discuss whether it is right to go to war or not. Just War Theory makes four basic points:

1. The damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain.
2. All other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective.
3. There must be serious prospects of success.
4. The use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated.  

If you stop to think about most of the arguments you have heard for or against any modern conflict (for example, the US invasion of Iraq) then you will realise that most of them hinge on one of the above four points. Augustine’s influence in this area still lives on today.

Augustine’s version of Original Sin and his support of infant baptism also influenced him to develop another doctrine that would be hugely influential - that of Predestination. According to Augustine, God foreordained, or predestined, who would be saved and who would be damned. Without this doctrine everything would seem to be down to pure chance or luck. After all, if infant baptism conferred salvation then it would seem to be nothing more than an accident of birth that one infant was born
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to Christian parents in the Christian Empire while another was born to pagan barbarians. Once you added Predestination to the theological mix of Christendom, then the problem was removed. The unfairness of luck or accident of birth never came into it, according to Augustine. It was the sovereign will of God that decided who was saved and who wasn’t, and no-one should question God’s will.

Augustine versus Pelagius

A furious row developed between Augustine and a British monk named Pelagius. Pelagius came from a background of Celtic Christianity where the conversion of adults from surrounding pagan tribes was a real issue. Most of what we know about Pelagius comes from what his enemies said about him, and he is usually represented as teaching that men could be saved purely by their own effort. More recently historians have questioned the accuracy of these attacks. It is likely that Pelagius, seeking to convert adults to the faith, placed more stress on the necessity for men to make a choice to receive Christ. Augustine, seeing salvation as primarily being about baptising babies, saw little point in talking about free will. For Augustine, salvation was something that was done for you, both by your parents and by God.

In the end the Church institution backed Augustine, whose concept of salvation fitted in so well with the whole Christendom project. Pelagius was condemned as a heretic and fled to Palestine where he died in obscurity. It is frustrating to think of what might have been. Celtic Christianity was just beginning to take off. Patrick would embark on his mission to evangelise Ireland only 15 years after Rome’s condemnation of Pelagius. Imagine how
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different the next 1000 years of Church History would have been if the Church’s passion had been to cross boundaries and persuade men and women to accept Christ, rather than to concentrate on baptising and indoctrinating those who were born in the ‘Christian Empire!’

As it was, Augustine’s doctrines became official Church teaching. Even today, through the influence of John Calvin, Augustine’s version of Original Sin and his doctrine of Predestination are taught in many Protestant churches.

One final aspect of Augustine’s influence was his attitude toward sex. He, more than any other individual, was responsible for equating sex, even within marriage, with sin. He had been involved in an immoral relationship before his conversion, fathering an illegitimate child. He taught that even husbands and wives should abstain from sexual intercourse, except for the express purpose of conceiving children.36

Much of the Church’s obsession with, and negativity towards, sexual matters can be traced back to Augustine. That is why today many Christians, rather than concentrating on living for Christ in their own personal morality and building strong healthy marriages, instead concentrate on worrying about what unbelievers are getting up to in their bedrooms.

Ambrose

The second Great Doctor of the Western Church was Ambrose, bishop of Milan. He was twenty years older than Augustine, and the two men knew each other well. In fact, it was Ambrose who baptised Augustine. Ambrose was instrumental in arguing against Arianism, and so upholding the Trinity and the Deity of Christ. So for this we can be grateful to him.
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In other areas Ambrose’s influence was not so helpful. He exalted Mary greatly, venerating her above all other human beings. Indeed, it was mainly through Ambrose’s influence that the Church adopted the doctrine of Mary’s Perpetual Virginity. This taught that Mary not only conceived Jesus Christ through the Virgin Birth, but that her hymen remained unbroken even in the process of giving birth, and that she remained a virgin for the rest of her life. The New Testament, of course, tells us that Jesus had brothers and sisters (Mark 6:3). But, for Ambrose, virginity and celibacy were the highest virtues and were to be defended and maintained at all cost.

Perhaps more seriously, Ambrose played a major role in approving of, and institutionalising, anti-Semitism as an integral part of Christendom. In 388 AD a mob, led by the Bishop of Callinicum, destroyed a synagogue. Emperor Theodosius, quite reasonably, ordered the rioters to pay for the rebuilding of the synagogue. Ambrose protested fiercely, declaring that the glory of God was at stake and that to make Christians pay for a new synagogue was tantamount to persecution that would force them to be traitors to their faith. A synagogue, according to Ambrose, was a “home of unbelief, a house of impiety, a receptacle of folly, which God Himself has condemned” and he expressed the wish that all synagogues could be similarly destroyed.

Theodosius caved in under Ambrose’s pressure, and the synagogue was not rebuilt. The rather predictable short-term result was that more mobs of rioters destroyed more synagogues. The long-term result was that anti-Semitism was enshrined as a virtue by a Doctor of the Church. God alone can calculate how much subsequent death and misery has resulted from that.
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Jerome

The third Great Doctor of the Western Church was a contemporary of Augustine and Ambrose, called Jerome. A prominent theologian and teacher in Rome, Jerome argued for many practices that today we would see as distinctive of Roman Catholicism. He encouraged the practice of venerating saints and martyrs, followed Ambrose in promoting prayer to Mary, and taught that the Bishop of Rome possessed an authority greater than any other Bishop. But the main reason why most people remember Jerome is because of his translation of the Bible into Latin, known as the Vulgate.

The Vulgate became the definitive version of the Bible for over a thousand years, and its poetical rhythms strongly influenced the translators of the King James Bible. Its Latin translations of many biblical words from the Greek and Hebrew have also greatly shaped the vocabulary of Christians to this very day. We can thank Jerome for English words such as creation, salvation, justification, testament, sanctification, regeneration, rapture, apostle, ecclesiastical, and evangelism.

Gregory

The last of the Four Great Doctors of the Western Church was Pope Gregory the Great. He lived two centuries after the other three (540-604 AD), at a time when the Roman Empire was declining and retained only a pale shadow of its former glory, wealth and power. Gregory reacted to this by stressing the power and authority of the Church. At the beginning of the Christendom project, in Constantine’s day, the Church had been very much the junior partner in the Church/State union. It had to be propped up and supported by the Empire. But, under
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Gregory, it was made clear that the Church was now in the driving seat. Any future attempts to revive the Roman Empire would now have to be propped up by the Church.

Gregory was a prolific writer who strongly argued that all other Christian churches must be subject to the Bishop of Rome. In many ways he strengthened the authority of the Papacy. He also developed the idea of purgatory, an unbiblical doctrine teaching that the souls of Christians had to suffer to be purged of their sins before they could enter heaven.

One interesting aspect to Gregory is that he was the person who made the connection (again, not a biblical one) between Mary Magdalene and the unnamed immoral woman of Luke 7:36-50. From this developed the tradition that Mary Magdalene was a converted prostitute - something the Roman Catholic Church did not finally repudiate until 1969. However, Gregory’s mistake gave no end of ammunition to rather silly conspiracy theorists who have managed to concoct all kinds of notions about Mary in books such as ‘The Da Vinci Code.’

Thomas Aquinas

Apart from the Four Great Doctors, there is one other figure who deserves special mention for his role in the development of the Church within Christendom. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was an Italian priest who became what many consider to be the foremost theologian of the Roman Catholic Church. He blended Greek philosophy, particularly that of Aristotle, with Christianity. This was often destructive, because it placed the speculations of a pagan Greek philosopher on the same level as the Word of God. For example, the reason why the Church would later persecute Galileo and suppress his discovery that the earth orbited the sun...
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was not because of anything in the Bible. It was because Galileo had contradicted Aristotle, and so Christianity earned a somewhat undeserved reputation of being ‘anti-science.’

Thomas’ great book, the *Summa Theologica*, became so influential that for many years it was placed beside the Bible on the altar while the Council of Trent and other Church Councils were meeting. He will also be remembered for developing the allegorical method of interpreting Scripture, which claimed that each Bible verse had a secret allegorical meaning in addition to the apparent plain meaning. This was obviously a wonderful tool for a Church institution that had adopted so many unbiblical practices and doctrines. If anyone asked what was the foundation for any aspect of the Church, its leaders could simply say that the practice was taught in the hidden allegorical meanings of Scripture.

Monasticism

One important development during these years was that of monasticism. From the earliest days of Christianity there had been ascetics and hermits who had gone into the desert to dwell in solitude and seek communion with God. Such individuals often failed to find what they were looking for, probably because Jesus wanted them to be in the world rather than to withdraw from the world. Also their activities sometimes seemed more bizarre than godly. For example, St Simeon Stylites (390-459 AD) is listed in *The Guinness Book of Records* for managing to sit on top of a flagpole for 37 years! However, overall the hermits’ search for holiness and spirituality was a constant reproach to those in Church leadership who were trying to gain power and wealth.
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In the early 6th Century, Benedict began setting up monastic communities who lived by carefully regulated rules. The Rule of St Benedict became the standard for other monastic orders to imitate. It was much more balanced than the hermits had been. The emphasis was on teaching monks to live together as a harmonious community rather than doing exploits such as sitting on flagpoles for decades. The Benedictines were followed by other orders such as the Franciscans, Carmelites, Dominicans and Augustinians.

The monasteries still emphasised withdrawal from the world, but many of them became centres of learning, and not just in the area of theology. Many monasteries developed new technologies and agricultural techniques, and began to develop commercial principles that would later be key in the emergence of commerce and capitalism. Also, some monasteries developed into the first modern universities - most notably in places like Oxford and Cambridge.

Relics and Pilgrimages

This period of Christendom also saw the rise in belief in the power of relics. This was a superstitious adoption of pagan practices where the possessions, or even the corpse, of a famous ruler or warrior was believed to provide protection for a city. In the Middle Ages possessing such items with Christian connections became an obsession. Rulers would pay huge sums of money to purchase the body parts of saints, and even waged wars over them.

Among the most cherished relics were pieces of wood that were claimed to be part of the Cross on which Jesus died, pieces of the manger from Bethlehem, Jesus’ swaddling clothes, the nails
The fascination with holy objects also extended to holy places. More and more pilgrims believed that they could gain extra spiritual merit by travelling to the Holy Land, visiting Jerusalem and other places mentioned in the Bible. One major problem, however, was that by the 11th Century the new religion of Islam had seized control of those lands. Pilgrims were now subject to persecution and harassment. Also, Muslim forces had invaded the territory of the Eastern Roman Empire, centred in Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul in Turkey). The Byzantine Emperor, Alexio, appealed to Pope Urban II to recruit mercenaries in the West who would be prepared to fight the Muslims.

Meanwhile, Pope Urban had problems of his own to contend with. The feudal system of government in Europe, with its multitude of noblemen, barons and knights, was not working well. There were too many armed barons riding around the countryside who considered themselves too noble to work for a living, and there wasn’t enough land or wealth to keep them all happy. Also, the disconnect between the clergy and the laity was causing frustration. Many people wanted to show their devotion to God in some way, but weren’t willing to commit to celibacy by
becoming priests or monks. Europe was like a powder keg just waiting to explode!

Alexio’s appeal for help seemed to come at just the right time. Here was an opportunity for Urban to kill three birds with one stone. He could be seen as the saviour of the Byzantines, get rid of all those troublesome barons, and provide an outlet for religious enthusiasm - all at the same time.

The Crusades

On the 27th November 1095, Urban II preached to a huge crowd in Clermont, France. He announced the launch of the First Crusade. Those who fought the Muslims and liberated Jerusalem, he declared, would know for certain that their sins were forgiven, and would be guaranteed instant passage into heaven without having to spend any time suffering in purgatory. Thousands volunteered to go to the Middle East to fight.

Over the next 200 years there were nine Crusades to the Holy Land in all. Militarily they were ultimately a failure and, after much bloodshed on both sides, the disputed lands all ended up under Muslim control. It is estimated that the Crusaders spent more time slaughtering Jews and Eastern Orthodox Christians than they ever did fighting Muslims. They left a legacy of bitterness and hatred in the Middle East that still plays out in world affairs to this day.

One of the worst events in the Crusades was known as ‘The Children’s Crusade.’ In 1212 tens of thousands of children marched across Europe, led by a 15-year old French shepherd boy who was convinced that Jesus had spoken to him in person and commanded him to lead a Crusade. Many of the children
The Descent into Darkness

died of shipwreck or hunger en route, and the rest were sold into slavery in Egypt and North Africa.46

Once the Crusades had started, it seemed that the concept of holy wars was here to stay. Further Crusades were launched against heretical groups such as the Cathars, reforming proto-Protestants such as the Waldensians and the Hussites, and against Slavs, Balts, Mongols, Jews, Eastern Orthodox Christians, and against anyone who was unfortunate enough to be considered a political enemy of any of a succession of Popes.

Then, just when it seemed as if the departure of Christendom from New Testament Christianity couldn’t possibly sink any lower, in 1184 Pope Lucius III had the bright idea of setting up something called the Inquisition.47

The purpose of the Inquisition was to root out and punish heresy. It had the power to arrest, torture and execute those who were suspected of holding wrong beliefs. Over the next few hundred years, thousands of people were slaughtered for being Muslim, for being Jewish, or for simply worshipping God according to the Bible as they understood it.

The period of history we have just been looking at is often known as the Dark Ages. Certainly, from a spiritual perspective, they deserve such a description. But all was not lost. After all, our God specialises at shining light into darkness.
How on Earth Did We End Up Here?
REVIEW OF BOOK TWO

(CONCRETE THAT WOULD SMOTHER GROWTH)

The spiritual decline from the Christianity of Perpetua and Felicitas to the Christendom of the Crusades and the Inquisition is truly breathtaking. Church History contains stories that can both inspire us and also make us feel deeply ashamed at the crimes that have been committed in the name of Jesus Christ.

The persecuted Church obtained tolerance and rest under Constantine, but that privilege came at a fearful cost. The alliance between the Church and the State resulted in Christianity being distorted as it took on the characteristics of paganism and of the Empire. Some of the most gifted minds of the day reinforced that process. Other gifted minds did achieve much that was good, but it is arguable that, by withdrawing from the world and being shut away in monasteries, they lacked the influence necessary to shape the Church for better.

When a short book like this tries to cover the significance of the entire period of Church History, then inevitably we often end up just brushing the surface. For example, the last three chapters have attempted to cover a period of over 1100 years in less than 10,000 words. That's one of the reasons why each Book Summary includes recommendations for further reading.
How on Earth Did We End Up Here?

Such an approach also runs the risk of over-simplifying what were often very complex processes. So it would be easy for a reader to conclude that Christianity before 312 AD was absolutely perfect, and that everything that went wrong was totally Constantine’s fault. That would not be entirely correct. There were, for example, worrying signs that a clergy/laity divide was developing earlier, with Christian leaders starting to refer to themselves as ‘priests.’

But the great thing about Christianity, as opposed to Christendom, is that it has a wonderful capacity to revive and reform itself. If the Church does start to lose its vitality, then God will raise up somebody somewhere who calls it back to its apostolic roots. And, since the moving of the Spirit of God is infinitely more attractive than the institutions of men, such revivals and reforming movements will grow and flourish. In a later Chapter we will see how one such modern movement, Pentecostalism, has prospered beyond anyone’s wildest expectations.

Under Constantinian Christendom, however, revival and reform movements tended to be attacked as heresy, and violently suppressed. This stifling of Christianity’s normal capacity for self-regeneration ensured that things continued to go downhill.

Recommended Further Reading

Foxes Book of Martyrs by John Foxe. First published in 1563, this details the martyrdom of early Christians including Polycarp, Perpetua and Felicitas. Later Chapters also describe the deaths of early Protestant martyrs. Best of all, since the author has obviously been dead for more than 50 years, the book is in the public domain, so free copies can be downloaded for e-readers.
Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome by Rodney Stark (HarperOne, 2006). Rodney Stark is a sociologist of religion and one of the leading historians of early Christianity. In this book he uses statistical data to demonstrate how the Early Church grew steadily, predominantly in cities and through social networks.

Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World by Stuart Murray (Paternoster Press, 2004). Quite simply, the best description and analysis of Christendom that I have ever read. Stuart Murray is a British Anabaptist and an urban church planter.

The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success by Rodney Stark (Random House, 2005). An interesting, and characteristically different, take by Rodney Stark where he concentrates on the achievements of the monasteries to argue that the Dark Ages weren’t actually that dark!

The Forge of Christendom: The End of Days and the Epic Rise of the West by Tom Holland (Doubleday, 2009). Tom Holland’s history books are always entertaining and highly readable. Having read his books on the Roman Republic (Rubicon) and the wars between the Persians and the Greeks (Persian Fire), I was delighted when he released this insightful study of the social, political and religious world that led up to the Crusades. In the United States this same book has, for some reason, been released under the different title of ‘Millennium: The End of the World and the Forging of Christendom.’
How on Earth Did We End Up Here?
BOOK THREE

CLAWING THEIR WAY BACK TO THE SURFACE

“Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first” (Revelation 2:5)

There is a real sense in which Church History is different from history in general. Herbert Butterfield, the great Cambridge historian, famously said “History is just one damned thing after another.” But, as Christians, we believe that God is directing history. There is a discernible pattern in the spiritual decline, and then recovery, of the Church. Secular movements and political events worked together to open the doors for the Church to claw its way back to the surface after being nearly drowned under the suffocating weight of Christendom and the Dark Ages.

But this recovery was uneven and, at times, frustratingly slow. We see a succession of pioneers and reformers who took great steps of faith, but who also often retained so much of the Christendom mindset. They were not perfect, they were men and women of faith who were shaped by the times in which they lived. But gradually, link by link, they form a chain of events that helped bring us to where we are today.
How on Earth Did We End Up Here?
RENAISSANCE AND REFORMATION
(How We Ended Up with Protestantism)

“Every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old” (Matthew 13:52)

In the 14th Century, Europe began to emerge from the Dark Ages through a movement called the Renaissance. ‘Renaissance’ literally means ‘a new birth,’ but this was not initially a spiritual movement so much as one of knowledge, art and culture.

Havens of Culture and Learning

During the Dark Ages the monasteries were just about the only places where people had time and opportunity to do any serious study or thinking. But their seclusion from the world limited the influence they could exert on the rest of society. For most people outside the monasteries, life tended to be hard, short and brutish. Many of the monasteries had gathered wonderful libraries, not just of religious texts but also of many manuscripts from the classical Greek and Roman world. Remember that this was before the invention of the printing press - so books were much rarer. A private individual who possessed more than half a dozen books would be considered a notable intellectual!
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But by the 14th Century things began to change. The beginning of a capitalistic system of commerce saw increased wealth in city states such as Florence and Venice. This meant that merchants and rulers could now afford to be patrons of knowledge and the arts, providing financial support for thinkers, scholars and artists. Some of the monasteries began to establish universities - opening up their libraries so that students could study the classical manuscripts. International travel had become more common, and travellers, including those returning from the Crusades, brought back forgotten manuscripts from the Byzantine Empire which restored long-lost treasures of science and philosophy.

Over the next two or three centuries, it seemed as if there was a new thirst for knowledge, and an unending supply of new ideas to meet that thirst. Greek and Arabic learning was rediscovered. Art began to be greatly appreciated, culminating in geniuses such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. People began to learn how to think for themselves. They carried out scientific experiments to try to understand how things worked. People like Galileo, on the basis of such experiments, were prepared to question the commonly accepted explanations, even daring to disagree with the opinions of Aristotle which had been exalted almost to the same level as Scripture.

The Power of Print

But the key event that really powered the Renaissance was Johannes Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press in 1440. Previously, books had been copied by hand, and even the hardest working scribe could only copy a few pages a day. But one of Gutenberg’s printing presses could produce 3,600 copies a day.
This allowed for an unprecedented transmission of information - and soon huge numbers of books were being passed around Europe. It has been estimated that more books were produced in the 50 years after Gutenberg’s invention, over 12 million copies, than had been produced in all of human history up to that point.¹⁸

We saw earlier that the Renaissance was not initially a spiritual movement. This is not to say that it was anti-religious, or even separated from religion. Many of the early pioneers in all areas of learning, particularly in science, were clergy or members of monastic orders. After all, they were often the only people who had enough leisure time to be able to study and to conduct experiments. Also, their faith that a God of order was in charge of the universe led them to search for an orderly plan in His creation - thus discovering natural laws and processes.

This is an important point, and one that should be stressed when we hear people misrepresenting Christianity as somehow being anti-scientific or as retarding progress. The fact is that the modern scientific method was developed by Christians who were eager to learn more about God’s universe. It is surely not just coincidence that the Renaissance and scientific discovery developed almost exclusively in the parts of the world that had been exposed to Christianity. Even with the Church’s many failings during the Dark Ages, it is still reasonable to argue that the world can thank the influence of Christianity for producing science.

The Morning Star of the Reformation

But, if the Renaissance owed a debt to Christianity, then that debt was about to be repaid with interest. For among the results...
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of the Renaissance was a renewed interest in the Hebrew and Greek languages, and the rediscovery of biblical manuscripts in those tongues. This, together with Gutenberg’s printing press, was about to make it possible for Christians to read the Bible for themselves in their own languages. For a thousand years the Bible had only been available through Jerome’s Vulgate Latin translation - and even that was often filtered through Aquinas’ allegorical interpretations. The Word of God was about to be set free!

Some had already made attempts to translate the Bible into languages other than Latin. John Wycliffe (1328-1384) was an English priest who taught at Oxford University and, like many academics of his age, also took a keen interest in mathematics and natural science. He produced an English translation of the Bible which, although it was based on Jerome’s Latin Vulgate, is still considered a milestone in that it was providing people with the Word of God in their own language.

Wycliffe also opposed the power of the Pope and the amassing of wealth by the Church. For this reason, he is seen as a fore-runner of reformers such as Luther and Calvin, and is sometimes called ‘The Morning Star of the Reformation.’ He attacked the central idea of Christendom by arguing that the Church should not have control over secular government and politics. These ideas became quite popular in England, and Wycliffe’s followers, nicknamed ‘Lollards,’ travelled the country in pairs preaching the Gospel. The Church dismissed Wycliffe from his position at Oxford, but were unable to take further action because he enjoyed popular support from the people, and also had some friends in high places in the nobility. On at least two occasions, large crowds of the common people turned up at
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events where the Church was seeking to arrest or to try Wycliffe for heresy, forcing his would-be persecutors to abandon their plans. The most the ecclesiastical authorities could do was to wait until he was long dead and then exhume his body and burn it. Translating the Bible into English was declared to be a crime punishable by charges of heresy.

Jan Hus

Ann of Bohemia (in the modern-day Czech Republic) was the wife of King Richard II of England. Some of her servants were influenced by Wycliffe’s preaching and, after Ann’s death, they returned to Bohemia. As a result, Jan Hus began to preach doctrines similar to those of Wycliffe. One abuse of power that Hus attacked was that of indulgences. This was where the Church would use the unbiblical doctrine of purgatory as a way to make money. By paying a fee to the Church you obtained a certificate promising that your soul, or the soul of a loved one, would spend less time suffering in purgatory. Hus also preached against the Church’s legitimisation of violence, particularly in the Crusades.

In 1414 Hus was invited to a public debate at Konstanz in Germany. He was promised safe passage, but was then arrested on the grounds that promises did not need to be kept if they were made to heretics. After a lengthy imprisonment Hus was tried and then burnt at the stake. Before his death he was reported as saying, “It is thus that you silence the goose (Hus means goose in Czech), but a hundred years hence there will arise a swan whose singing you shall not be able to silence.”

Erasmus

The next key figure was Erasmus (1466-1536), a Dutch scholar and priest who criticised many of the abuses in the
Catholic Church. He published the New Testament in Greek to show how the existing Latin Vulgate of Jerome was inadequate. Erasmus never left the Catholic Church, but most historians believe that his writings, and particularly his New Testament translation, paved the way for the Protestant reformers. The recent invention of the printing press enabled Erasmus’ books to spread rapidly throughout Europe. Therefore the later Counter-Reformation movement within Catholicism labelled Erasmus as the ‘chicken who hatched the egg of the Reformation.’

One other interesting point about Erasmus is that he taught that men have free will to accept or to reject the Gospel. This was a direct contradiction of the idea of predestination which, as taught by Augustine, had helped underpin the whole system of Christendom. It represented a return towards a form of Christianity where we preach the Gospel to people and ask them to make a decision to receive Christ.

**Martin Luther**

Martin Luther was a young man studying law at the University of Erfurt, when he narrowly escaped being struck by lightning during a thunderstorm. Fearing for his life, he promised God that he would become a monk. The rigid clergy/laity divide made him think that this was the only way to be sure of his salvation. But life in the monastery did not bring spiritual peace, and the young Luther became increasingly depressed. His superior in the Augustinian order advised him to study theology, and so Luther became a student, then later a doctor of theology, at the University of Wittenberg.

Then, in 1517, something happened that was to change Luther, and indeed the world, for ever. Johann Tetzel, a
Dominican friar, was selling indulgences in Germany. The sale of these indulgences was partly to finance the rebuilding of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, but a percentage was also being creamed off to help the Archbishop of Mainz repay the massive debts he had incurred while paying bribes to receive his appointments. Luther was outraged as he watched the poor people of Wittenberg flocking to pay money to shorten their loved ones’ stay in purgatory. Tetzel even used an advertising jingle: “As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.”

Luther wrote 95 theses condemning the sale of indulgences, and on the 31st October 1517 nailed them to the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg. They were originally written in Latin, but his friends translated them into German and thousands of copies were printed and distributed all over Europe, making Martin Luther a household name. Some historians believe, thanks to the printing press, that this was the first time a controversy had ever been argued out in such a public way – the first modern media event or public relations happening!

Explaining why indulgences were wrong, and why paying cash could not obtain salvation from God, forced Luther to clarify his thinking on what was the way of salvation. As he studied the Bible he came to see the basic New Testament truth that salvation was by God’s grace and was received by faith in Jesus Christ. This led him to compare the practices and teaching of the 16th Century Church with the Bible in many other areas. The end result could be summed up in two Latin slogans: ‘sola fide’ (faith alone) and ‘sola scriptura’ (the Bible alone). In other words, salvation was by faith in Jesus Christ, not by the ceremonies of the Church, and truth was to be determined by the Bible, not by
Reformation

On these two principles Luther would go on to argue against Papal authority, indulgences, purgatory, the enforced celibacy of the clergy, and the doctrine of transubstantiation (the notion that the bread and wine literally transformed into the body and blood of Christ during the mass). Initially Luther had no intention of starting a new Church. He thought it would be possible to reform the existing Church. In order to facilitate this, he translated the Bible into German.

Of course the existing Church had no intention of being reformed. After all, it had managed to suppress similar challenges on numerous occasions through the centuries. But two new factors made that more difficult in Luther’s case. Firstly, the Church had always relied on badmouthing those groups that it deemed heretical. It is easy to condemn our enemies if we can ascribe all kinds of outlandish teachings to them. But they couldn’t do that with Luther, because the printing press meant that everyone knew exactly what it was that Luther was saying. Secondly, Luther had friends in high places. The divided nature of German politics at the time, meant that it was expedient for Frederick III, Elector of Saxony, to shelter Luther so as to undermine rival princes. Gradually Europe divided into Protestant states and Catholic states, usually decided by the personal preferences of the princes and rulers. The end result was that Europe would be ravaged by religious wars for 150 years.

Indeed, it is this political involvement that makes it difficult to assess Luther’s influence on Christianity as a whole. In one sense
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we could argue that one form of Christendom simply replaced another. In parts of Europe, Protestant Church/State alliances replaced Catholic Church/State alliances. Having said that, it is difficult to see how, without such political support, Luther could have avoided being quickly arrested and burned at the stake like Jan Hus. Remember the prophecy Hus gave before his death? “It is thus that you silence the goose, but a hundred years hence there will arise a swan whose singing you shall not be able to silence.” It was 102 years from the execution of Jan Hus to the day when Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church doors.

Luther - Hero or Villain?

Just as Hus was invited to the Council at Konstanz to debate his opponents, Luther was invited to the Diet of Worms in 1521. Like Hus he was promised safe passage. Like Hus he was condemned as a heretic. Like Hus when ordered to renounce his views, he refused to do so, declaring “Here I stand. I can do no other.” Like Hus he was ordered to be arrested, but the order could not be carried out because of the protection given to Luther by Frederick III. From this point onward it was obvious that the Roman Catholic Church was not open to Luther’s reforms. Now western Christianity would be split between Catholics and Protestants.

We must remember that Luther was, to a great extent, a product of his age and his background. He broke from Catholicism on many issues, but in other areas he did not go far enough. He still accepted the practice of infant baptism, even though he accepted that baptism was not a means of salvation for them. He still maintained the division between clergy and laity, but with the improvements that priests were now allowed to
marry, and it was recognised that God could bless and use lay people, so that their secular employment was still a means by which they could serve God. He still supported forcing people to pay tithes as compulsory taxes to the Church. He still justified the use of violence, seeing it as only right and proper that Protestant princes should force their subjects to be Protestants. He also approved of the persecution of the Anabaptists, believers who practiced adult baptism and tried to worship according to their consciences and their understanding of Scripture. In a cruel mockery of their views, Luther urged that the Anabaptists should be executed by drowning.\textsuperscript{56}

Some of Luther’s statements about the Catholic Church and its dignitaries often sound shocking and vindictive to the modern ear, but we need to remember that this organisation was seeking to have him arrested and executed, so feelings were bound to run high. For example, one of his hymns sang out, “Lord, shield us with Thy Word our Hope, And smite the Moslem and the Pope!”\textsuperscript{57}

Luther got involved in a huge political controversy toward the end of his life, and it graphically illustrates the corrosive effects of a Church/State alliance. He gave private counsel to a Protestant prince, Philip of Hesse. Philip wanted to marry a second wife, effectively committing bigamy. Luther advised him that if he was determined to do so then he should keep it quiet. When the affair threatened to go public, Luther advised Philip to ‘tell a good strong lie.’\textsuperscript{58} “This did great damage to Luther’s reputation.

But Luther’s biggest Christendom failing was probably his anti-Semitism. This was nothing new. After all, the Church had been persecuting Jews since the time of Ambrose of Milan. But Luther took it to a whole new level. He called Jews ‘the devil’s
people’ and ‘poisonous envenomed worms.’ He advocated the burning of synagogues, the seizure of their property, deportation, slavery, and even said, “We are at fault in not slaying them.” 400 years later the Nazis would quote Luther in support of their policy of genocide against the Jews.59

So how are we to assess Martin Luther? Was he a hero, who set the Church free from the domination of Rome? Or was he a villain who replaced Catholic Christendom with an equally damaging Protestant Christendom? The answer is probably a bit of both. Overall, Luther was not a pleasant character. He retained many of the features of Christendom that had been introduced into the Church by Constantine. His reformation was only partial and undoubtedly did not go far enough. But his insistence on sola scriptura opened a door that no one could shut. It provided the foundation for others to examine religious practices and weigh them according to the Bible. Also, Luther taught something called the ‘perspicuity of Scripture.’ This means that the sense of the Bible is clear enough to be understood by ordinary people who are prepared to study Scripture, and humbly allow themselves to be guided by God. In other words, there was to be no more hiding behind allegorical interpretations of the Bible in order to justify unbiblical practices and doctrines. For this we can all be grateful.

The Freedom to Think

One by-product of the Reformation was an increase in intellectual freedom. After all, once you allow religious debate, rather than an all-powerful Church telling everyone what to think, people feel more free to explore new ideas. So, for example, when Galileo wanted to publish his theory that the earth orbited...
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the sun, he smuggled his manuscript to Protestant Holland, where there was no censorship to prevent him challenging Aristotle’s belief that the earth was the centre of the universe. 

John Calvin

Of course Luther was not the only reformer in the 16th Century. Others included Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer and Philipp Melanchthon. But, apart from Luther, the other dominant figure of the Reformation was a French theologian called John Calvin (1509-1564).

Calvin settled in Geneva in Switzerland. There he worked with the City Council to try to build a society based on biblical principles. His theological system followed Augustine’s ideas of predestination. He still maintained that salvation was by faith, but argued that it was the sovereign grace of God which determined whether someone would make the choice to believe or not.

Calvin, like Luther, still maintained much of the Christendom mindset. He practised and taught infant baptism, and still saw the State as being appointed to punish heretics. For example, he approved of the actions of the Geneva Council, when it executed Michael Servetus for denying the Trinity in 1553. In fairness, this one execution for heresy pales into insignificance when compared with the hundreds of thousands who were killed by the Catholic Church during the Counter-Reformation, but it does show that sometimes old habits and mind-sets are hard to break.

In one area of thought, Calvin’s study of the Bible had unexpected consequences. For centuries the Church had forbidden usury (the lending of money at interest). This was based on prohibitions in the Book of Leviticus. Without the ability to lend and borrow money it would obviously be difficult,
if not impossible, to develop an effective capitalistic economy. Calvin, however, pointed out that many laws in the Old Testament were applied just to the Jews, and are not binding on Christians today. That is why Christians are not obliged to be circumcised and are allowed to eat pork. Therefore, said Calvin, we need to study the Old Testament carefully to understand which Old Testament laws were binding on all men for all time, and which were only applicable to the Jews. This encouraged the citizens of Geneva to conclude that it was permitted for Christians to lend money to one another and charge interest, enabling them to establish banks with less restrictions than applied in most parts of Europe. This head start is one major reason why Switzerland developed their famous banking system.

But Calvin’s breakthrough in this subject of hermeneutics (the interpretation of Scripture) was significant for other reasons, and not just because of Swiss banks. Ever since Augustine, the Church had relied increasingly on Old Testament passages to justify its policies of violence and coercion. For example, they ignored the teaching of Jesus about turning the other cheek (Matthew 5:39), and instead cited the examples of Israel waging wars of conquest in the Book of Joshua. Calvin was bringing the Church back to read the Scriptures as the Early Church before Constantine had read them - where the Old Testament had to be understood and applied in the light of the New Testament, particularly the words of Jesus. Calvin didn’t carry this idea through fully, as the execution of Michael Servetus demonstrates, but he had prepared the way for future generations of believers to start reading the Bible in a way that would be more thoughtful, and more authentically Christian.
Calvin’s long term influence and legacy was probably greater than that of Luther when it comes to the English-speaking world. This is because Geneva became a refuge for English and Scottish Protestants who were fleeing from religious persecution during the reign of Mary Tudor in the 1550s. Those refugees included many who would become key Puritan and Baptist leaders in England, and also John Knox, the father of Scottish Presbyterianism. Many English Puritans and Baptists, together with Scottish and Irish Presbyterians, would later emigrate to North America and shape much of the religious life in the New World. This is why Calvinism has persisted so strongly in the US, particularly in movements such as the Southern Baptists and the Reformed Churches.

The Reformation truly was an international movement that touched many parts of Europe. We could say that it started in embryonic form in England with John Wycliffe, developed in Bohemia with Jan Hus, burst into life in Germany with Martin Luther, and was refined in Geneva with John Calvin. Next the centre of attention would be fixed firmly on Britain, and from there to America.
In England, where many would see John Wycliffe as having paved the way for Hus, Tyndale and Calvin, the Reformation took a different direction. The King, Henry VIII, was initially a defender of Catholicism. He wrote a book against Martin Luther in 1521 for which the Pope awarded him the title ‘Defender of the Faith’ (fidei defensor - a title still claimed by British monarchs in the letters FD that appear on every British coin). But one of the effects of the Renaissance had been an increase in national identity and pride. In the past, people had identified themselves more by their family, trade, or religion than by nationality. For example, British subjects paid their compulsory church taxes directly to Rome, not to the British crown. But now people were more likely to identify themselves as being French, German or English. This created the conditions for kings like Henry to challenge the authority of the Church.
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The Great Divorce

Henry’s break with Rome officially came because he wanted to divorce his wife, Catherine of Aragon, to seek better luck with a new wife at producing a male heir to the throne. The Pope refused to grant an annulment. It is likely that Henry also had his eye on the church taxes that were currently going to Rome, and the extensive lands and assets possessed by English monasteries. But none of this meant that England would embrace Protestantism. It would have been perfectly possible for the English Church to have maintained Catholic doctrines and practices while still being autonomous from Rome. Several Eastern churches, such as the Maronites, have done this. So why did England become a predominantly Protestant nation?

Here, as so often, we find that personal social networks can have more influence than the rulings of monarchs and Popes. Henry’s choice for his second wife (there would be four more after her) was Anne Boleyn. Anne’s father had been a diplomat in Europe, and accompanying him on his travels she had come into contact with Lutheran ideas. Henry’s chief minister, Thomas Cromwell, had also travelled in Europe, where he met Erasmus and, quite amazingly, committed Erasmus’ entire New Testament to memory. Another key figure influenced by Erasmus was Thomas Cranmer. He was friends with several of the Swiss reformers, and Anne Boleyn was able to persuade the king to appoint Cranmer as the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Thomas Cranmer used to meet at the White Horse Inn in Cambridge with like-minded friends such as Hugh Latimer, Miles Coverdale and William Tyndale. Here, as in mainland Europe, we see that the Universities where the Renaissance flourished also became the centres where the Reformation was developed.
God Save the King!

Through such people the English Church gradually became more Protestant in its teachings. Henry VIII himself hesitated between Catholicism and Protestantism during his reign. In the end it is probably fair to say that Henry did whatever would benefit Henry! He suppressed the monasteries for reasons of financial gain, and then outlawed the pilgrimages and relics that were associated with the monasteries. Then, when he saw that translating the Bible into English was encouraging people to want a separation of Church and State, he persecuted Tyndale the translator.

Henry’s Children

Henry was succeeded by his son, Edward VI who promoted Protestantism for six years and then died at the tender age of 15. Then his half-sister Mary Tudor, remembered by Protestants as ‘Bloody Mary,’ pursued an aggressive policy of reinstating Catholicism for five years until she also died. Many British reformers fled to Geneva to avoid persecution during Mary’s reign. Finally, Elizabeth I came to the throne and everything changed again.

These were years of continual persecution and intolerance. Either a Protestant monarch was persecuting Catholics or a Catholic monarch was persecuting Protestants. The real tragedy, of course, was that no one seemed to question why kings or queens should be able to dictate to their subjects how they should worship.

Under Elizabeth the political and religious agendas became increasingly intertwined. Elizabeth had herself proclaimed as the Supreme Governor of the Church of England, a title retained by English monarchs up to the present day. Then, in 1569 there was
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a major unsuccessful rebellion among Catholics in the north of England who wanted to remove Elizabeth by force and put Mary Queen of Scots on the throne instead. In 1588 King Philip II of Spain, supported by the Pope, assembled the Spanish Armada in a doomed attempt to invade England. Increasingly, to be Catholic was to be seen as an enemy of the State.

King James

In 1603 Elizabeth died after 45 years as queen. She was succeeded by James I. James had a delicate balancing act on his hands with the various religious parties in the Kingdom. Catholics had high hopes that he would be more tolerant towards them than Elizabeth had been. However, when they realised this wouldn’t happen, then some Catholics attempted to assassinate James by blowing up the House of Lords in London while the king was there. This failed Gunpowder Plot increased the persecution of Catholics and saw them further stigmatised as potential traitors.

The Puritans and Presbyterians were hardly much more pleased with James. They resented his control over the Church and felt that the Church of England still retained far too many of its pre-Reformation characteristics. This ill-feeling was increasingly expressed through the Geneva Bible, an English translation of the Scriptures produced by exiles who fled to Calvin’s Geneva during Mary Tudor’s reign. The Geneva Bible was published with study notes in the margin which were critical of King James. It insisted on translating ‘king’ as ‘tyrant,’ and became wildly popular, running through over 140 editions.64
God Save the King!

The Authorised Version

Therefore, one of James’ first acts was to replace the Geneva Bible. He arranged for a panel of translators that would do his bidding, and instructed them to produce a translation which would bolster his own authority and strengthen the church hierarchy. The result was the King James Version (KJV) of 1611. This translation was deliberately slanted to support the structure of the Church of England.

At first the Puritans and Baptists insisted on retaining the Geneva Bible. But soon it was forbidden by law to do so. The first instance in history of ‘King-James-Onlyism’ was when the king forcibly suppressed the Geneva Bible in order to spite those Christians who disobeyed him by maintaining such practices as believers’ baptism and rejecting State control of congregations.

One of the groups who grudgingly accepted the KJV was a small congregation in Scrooby in Nottinghamshire. Eventually they would flee to find religious freedom in America, taking copies of the KJV with them on their ship, the Mayflower.

The Geneva Bible did enjoy a revival after the English Civil War, as it was promoted by the Puritans under Oliver Cromwell. Cromwell’s forces overthrew and executed Charles I in 1649 and ruled until 1660. However, the Puritans managed to make themselves, and their religion, highly unpopular by trying to abolish Christmas and banning popular sports such as football. This pretty well guaranteed that when the monarchy was restored under Charles II that the English population would dump everything associated with Puritanism - and that meant the end of the Geneva Bible’s influence. So, for any Englishman who loved the King and Christmas (and football), and wanted to keep having archbishops and getting his babies baptised, there was
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only one Bible worth having. The KJV became the default Bible in the English language, and thousands of emigrants subsequently carried it to America.

So, because of repressive laws against the Bible of choice of the early Puritans and Baptists, and because of an understandable popular backlash against the excesses of Oliver Cromwell’s football and Christmas-hating regime, the KJV ended up being used in America by churches that neither loved the king, nor wanted to have archbishops controlling them. It is strange that today the spiritual descendants of the Baptists and Puritans (in a country that long ago rejected the authority of kings and freed churches from State control) are often the most dogmatic in insisting that the KJV is the only true English Bible.

**Discrimination and Toleration**

In 1685 James II became king. James was a convert to Catholicism and he sought to change the laws that discriminated against Catholics. Interestingly, he stated that he fully intended to keep the laws that discriminated against non-Anglican forms of Protestantism, such as the Covenanters and Presbyterians in Scotland who refused to submit their congregations to State control. This created the suspicion that James did not so much want religious toleration as much as he wanted the pendulum to swing again and to replace Protestant Christendom once more with Catholic Christendom. Many English Protestants invited William of Orange to come and seize the throne from James. This regime change, known as ‘The Glorious Revolution,’ was enforced by military victories over James in Ireland - events that still create sectarian bitterness in Ireland up to the present day.
After this, the religious situation in Britain, as in much of Europe grew much calmer. In mainland Europe the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 brought to an end conflicts and religious wars that had been raging since the time of Luther. The Treaty was a compromise that allowed States still to promote official religions, but also provided for toleration of minority groups to meet in private buildings without persecution or harassment. In England, the Act of Toleration of 1689 relaxed the persecution of Catholics and other religious minorities, even if it stopped short of full religious equality. To this day, for example, it is forbidden for a Catholic to become king or queen of the United Kingdom – a restriction that was publicly supported by a British Prime Minister as recently as 2011.66

So why did the western world suddenly become more religiously tolerant in the 17th Century? There were several reasons. One was that colonists in North America appeared to be prospering and creating a successful society without the State enforcing any one form of Christianity. Many religious minorities had emigrated to find freedom, and by and large they were able to live alongside each other peaceably.

Another reason was that people got heartily sick of religious intolerance, war and violence. Indeed, this caused many people to become disillusioned with religion altogether. Alister McGrath, himself an Anglican, has argued that this disillusionment weakened religious belief and commitment, paving the way for atheism and agnosticism in some countries, and the reinstatement of the Anglican Church in England!67 This weakening of religious belief is linked to a movement known as the Enlightenment. You could compare it to a chicken and egg situation - which came first, the Enlightenment or the weakening of belief?

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The Enlightenment

The Enlightenment was a movement that exalted human reason as the be all and end all. The Bible tells us that God’s wisdom is different from man’s wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:18-31), but the Enlightenment declared that if it’s not man’s wisdom then it isn’t wisdom at all! Truth must be determined by observing testable facts, not by being revealed to us either by the Holy Spirit or by the Bible.

Belief in a personal God tended to be replaced by Deism. Deism maintains that, by studying creation, we can conclude that there is a God. But, it goes on to say, that knowledge has been achieved by reason not by revelation. And, since scientific experimentation can tell us little else about God, we can only regard Him as an absent Creator who no longer intervenes in the world. So Deism viewed God as if He had created a clock, wound it up so it continued operating, and then departed. This means no miracles, no new birth, and no inspired Scriptures. Many of the founding fathers of the United States, such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, were strongly influenced by Deism.

Thanks to the Enlightenment and Deism, by the 18th Century much of both Catholic and Protestant Christendom lacked spiritual life and power. Churches became dull and formal. In many pulpits the Word of God was displaced by philosophical discourses or by lectures on morality. This insipid religion further increased people’s disillusionment with Christianity. In France this found expression in violent revolution and an increase in atheist beliefs. The French Revolution involved the casting off of all traditional authority, both that of the King and that of the Church. This is one of the main dangers in Christendom. When
the Church is identified with a State or political system then it is
greatly damaged when the political circumstances change. William
Inge, Anglican Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral in the early 20th
Century, put it well when he said, “Whoever marries the spirit of
this age will find himself a widower in the next.”

But England didn’t face any such revolution or upheaval as
did the French. And even in North America, the revolution was
to be more of a reaction against colonialism than any kind of
backlash against religion. To understand why, strange as it might
seem, we have to go back 300 years to Central Europe, to
Bohemia and to our old friend Jan Hus.
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THE SON ALSO RISES IN THE WEST
(How We Ended Up with Methodists, Worship Leaders, Revivals and the Abolition of Slavery)

“People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God” (Luke 13:29)

After Hus was burnt at the stake in 1415, his followers refused to just go away. They increased numerically in both Bohemia and Poland. Indeed, it has been estimated that, 150 years later, over 90% of the inhabitants of the Czech lands had rejected the teachings of the Catholic Church. Eventually this movement was violently suppressed and its leaders were killed. But a small group of Bohemians, known as ‘The Hidden Seed’ managed to survive for almost 100 years as a secret underground church in eastern Moravia. Eventually this group sought shelter on the estate of a nobleman, Count von Zinzendorf, in Saxony (part of modern Germany).

The Moravians

Zinzendorf, as a young man, had visited a museum in Dusseldorf where he saw a famous painting of Christ by
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Domenico Fetti. Underneath the painting he read the words, “This have I done for you - Now what will you do for Me?” This led to a commitment to serve God by helping the poor and the needy. It was this commitment that prompted Zinzendorf to allow the Moravians to settle on his estate, where they built a town called Herrnhut (meaning “The Lord’s Watchful Care”).

At first this Moravian community was sadly divided by splits and cliques. But Zinzendorf met with them and encouraged them to pray for love and unity. They experienced an outpouring of the Holy Spirit similar to that on the Day of Pentecost as described in Acts Chapter Two. The community then grew to become a powerful centre for prayer, with a strong emphasis on taking the Gospel to the world through missions outreach. They started a prayer meeting in Herrnhut which continued 24 hours a day, non-stop, for over 100 years. Today the modern 24/7 prayer movement looks to the Moravians as their spiritual forerunners and inspiration. During the same period, the Moravians sent more missionaries worldwide per head of population than any other Christian movement. They made an important break from Christendom by being the first church for over a thousand years to send lay members, rather than priests or clergy, as missionaries. Indeed, it was the Moravian missionary effort that inspired William Carey, even though Carey is popularly remembered as the father of the modern missionary movement.

Some of those missionaries, travelling to North America in 1735, were to have an unexpected impact upon the Church in England, which had become so lifeless and formal through the influence of the Enlightenment and Deism. As the missionaries were still sailing across the Atlantic there blew up a terrible storm. The winds snapped the mast of the ship and it looked as if...
The Son Also Rises in the West

everybody on board would end up at the bottom of the sea. Some English passengers were thrown into a blind panic at the prospect of drowning, but the Moravians calmly sang hymns and prayed. Two of the panicking Englishmen that were most impressed by this were brothers, called John and Charles Wesley.

The Wesleys

The Wesley brothers had been students in Oxford where they had sought to find a closer fellowship with God. Together with another student, George Whitefield, they had formed a group called ‘The Holy Club.’ They tried to follow a strict discipline of prayer and Bible reading, causing the other students to mock them for their strict methodology, and calling them ‘Methodists’ as an insult. They were certainly very sincere and earnest, but their endeavours lacked the fire of the Holy Spirit. John Wesley was an ordained clergyman, and the two brothers were invited to Savannah, Georgia, so that John could take charge of the newly formed parish of Savannah. It was on this journey that they had their dramatic encounter with the Moravians during the storm at sea.

The Wesleys’ time in Savannah was a miserable failure. John was involved in a court case over a broken engagement with a young lady, and his reputation was badly damaged. His attempts to preach to the native Americans didn’t go much better either. He wrote in his journal:

\[ I \text{ went to America to convert the Indians, but oh, who shall convert me?} \]
\[ \ldots \text{I have a fair summer religion. I can talk well; nay, and I believe myself, when no danger is near. But let death look me in the face, and my spirit is troubled. Nor can I say, ‘to die is gain.’} \text{I have a sin of fear that when I have spun my last thread I shall perish on the shore…} \]
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have learned that I who went to America to convert others was not converted myself.\textsuperscript{71}

Joseph Hutton described an encounter in America between John Wesley and some Moravians:

He talked much with the learned Spangenberg, and continued the intercourse when he arrived in Georgia. “My brother,” said Spangenberg, “I must first ask you one or two questions. Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with you that you are a child of God?” John Wesley was dumb. “Do you know Jesus Christ?” asked Spangenberg. “I know,” replied Wesley, “that He is the Saviour of the world.” “Do you know,” pursued Spangenberg, pressing the question further home, “that He has saved you?” “I hope He has died to save me,” stammered Wesley. “Do you know yourself?” persisted Spangenberg, who was not content with skin-deep work. “I do,” replied Wesley, “but,” says he, “I fear they were vain words.” For a time he stumbled on as dazed as ever.\textsuperscript{72}

The Methodist Revival

On his return to England, in 1738, John Wesley attended a Moravian prayer meeting in Aldersgate Street in London. There he had a genuine experience of God for himself. As he later described it, “I felt my heart strangely warmed.”\textsuperscript{73} He briefly travelled to Herrnhut to study, and felt strongly called to preach the Gospel, but most Church of England parishes refused to allow him in their pulpits. So what was he to do?

At this point, Wesley met up again with George Whitefield, his companion from the Holy Club in Oxford. Whitefield was also excluded from most Anglican parishes, so he had started preaching to the common people in fields and other open-air settings. He urged his friend to do the same, and so Wesley embarked on a preaching ministry that would transform England.
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Over the next 50 years he travelled 250,000 miles on horseback and preached over 40,000 sermons. Other Church of England clergy got upset that he would not observe ecclesiastical boundaries and preached in their parishes. Wesley’s famous response was, “I look upon the world as my parish!”

Charles Wesley

One of the key aspects of Wesley’s ministry was his partnership with his brother Charles. Charles was a gifted song writer who penned some of the most memorable hymns in the English language such as ‘And Can It Be That I Should Gain?’ ‘Christ the Lord is Risen Today,’ ‘Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus,’ ‘Jesus, Lover of My Soul,’ ‘Jesus, The Name High Over All,’ ‘Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending,’ ‘Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,’ ‘O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing,’ and the Christmas Carol ‘Hark the Herald Angels Sing!’ Without Charles Wesley it is unlikely that we would ever have seen the worship leaders and song writers of today. The Wesleys set the pattern for stirring preaching to go hand-in-hand with attractive music and songs that could be sung congregationally, rather than expecting people to simply listen to organ recitals and choirs.

Another striking aspect of Charles Wesley’s songs was their theological content. They were packed with biblical allusions and references to key doctrines such as salvation, the new birth, holiness, the incarnation of Christ etc. For example, compare ‘Hark the Herald Angels Sing!’ with a typical Christmas Carol of the 18th Century:

Hark! The herald angels sing
Glory to the new-born King!
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.
Joyful all ye nations rise,
Join the triumph of the skies,
With the angelic host proclaim
Christ is born in Bethlehem!
Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
Risen with healing in his wings.
Mild, he lays his glory by;
Born, that man no more may die,
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.

Wesley’s lyrics refer to Christ bringing reconciliation between God and man, allude to prophecies by both Isaiah and Malachi, speak of eternal life and the resurrection from the dead, and finish with a reference to the necessity of being born again. It is virtually a sermon in song!

Now let’s examine a typical Christmas Carol that was already popular at the time of the Wesleys:

Ding dong merrily on high,
In heav’n the bells are ringing;
Ding dong! Verily the sky
Is ris’n with angel singing,
Gloria, Hosanna in excelsis!

E’en so here below, below,
Let steeple bells be swungen,
And “Io, io, io!”
By priest and people sungen.
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Gloria, Hosanna in excelsis!

Pray you, dutifully prime
Your matin chime, ye ringers;
May you beautifully rhyme
Your evetime song, ye singers.
Gloria, Hosanna in excelsis!

There is no theological content, just a few references to church traditions, and at least one line that appears to just be noises to try to create a rhyme. Charles Wesley elevated hymn singing from a cultural oddity to a means of teaching biblical truth.

Methodism as a Movement

Another important way that John Wesley influenced our Christianity of today was through his teaching on sanctification, or holiness. Wesley maintained that salvation was only the beginning, and that it was possible to receive a further baptism of the Spirit which produced holiness in the believer’s life. This experience, which Wesley called ‘entire sanctification,’ did not make people sinlessly perfect, but rather, in Wesley’s teaching, enabled them to live a life without committing deliberate sin. This holiness emphasis would be an important step in encouraging later generations of believers to seek a second blessing of grace, giving rise to the modern Pentecostal movement.

John Wesley never intended to form a separate denomination. Both he and Charles remained as ministers of the Church of England until their dying days. But circumstances in North America changed all that - and once again it was to do with the Christendom concept of a clergy/laity divide. Clergy had to be ordained by bishops. But during the American War of
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Independence, the Anglican bishops in North America were predominantly loyalists who fled to Canada. Therefore, Wesleyan leaders began carrying out their own ordinations, leading to a breach with Canterbury, and the establishment of a new denomination that today serves more than 70 million members, and bears the name that had been used as an insult back in Oxford University in the 1730s – ‘Methodists!’

There is a serious historical argument that John Wesley was responsible for ensuring that Britain avoided a violent revolution such as that experienced by the French. Instead of seeing religion as a cold distant hierarchy allied to the State, many British people experienced a form of Christianity that was passionate, related to the common man, and was prepared to work for social justice.

George Whitefield

George Whitefield, the Wesley’s friend from Oxford, also continued his open-air evangelism for many years in both Britain and North America. In an age when travel by sea was slow and dangerous, Whitefield crossed the Atlantic 13 times. He often preached to crowds numbering up to 30,000. On one occasion, at Kingswood, near Bristol, coal miners on their way home from work stopped to listen to him. As the Spirit of God touched their hearts, they began to cry, their tears washing white gutters down their dust-blackened faces.

The story is told that Benjamin Franklin believed the estimates of crowds listening to Whitefield’s sermons were exaggerated. After all, as a public speaker himself, Franklin knew that it was impossible for one man’s voice, without any amplification, to reach such a large crowd. So Franklin walked
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around the edge of the crowd during one of Whitefield’s sermons and, from his measurements, calculated that at least 30,000 were indeed able to hear Whitefield’s message. Franklin and Whitefield became firm friends.

Despite their friendship, Wesley and Whitefield had several major differences of opinion. One was over slavery. Wesley wanted slavery abolished, whereas Whitefield not only defended slavery as necessary for the economic well-being of Georgia, but was a slave owner himself. But their most famous controversy was over predestination and free will. Whitefield, following Augustine and Calvin, taught that God foreordained in advance who would be saved and who would not. Wesley adopted a position of Arminianism (after the Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius), arguing that people had the freedom to either accept Christ or reject Christ. This dispute was never fully resolved, and to this day hundreds of millions of Christians embrace one or the other of the two positions. But that did not lessen their respect for one another. On one occasion a fellow Calvinist asked Whitefield if he thought he would see Wesley in heaven. Whitefield replied, “I fear not, for he will be so near the eternal throne, and we at such a distance, we shall hardly get sight of him.”

Before the ministry of Whitefield and Wesley, the Church in North America had become just as dead and formal as in England. This may seem surprising since many of the early emigrants to America had been sincere believers seeking religious freedom from the discrimination they had encountered in Europe. But sadly many of the settlers were content to exchange one form of Christendom for another. So in the late 17th Century in Massachusetts, we find those who had previously fled religious
intolerance now burning suspected witches and hanging Quakers.\(^8\)

The Quakers were a movement established by George Fox in England. They taught that Christians could receive direct revelations from God without needing much of the trappings of Christendom. They rejected the clergy/lait divide, the union of Church and State, and the use of violence. However, they departed from historic Christian practice by also rejecting the sacraments of baptism and communion. The Quakers also rejected Luther’s doctrine of *sola scriptura*. They believed that Christ, rather than the Bible, was the Word of God. Because of the persecution they received in many of the early American colonies, a prominent Quaker, William Penn, established Pennsylvania as a safe haven.

### The First Great Awakening

Whitefield’s ministry in New England in 1740 was part of what is now known as ‘The First Great Awakening.’ Huge numbers of people were converted. This had political as well as religious effects. Essentially, as with Quakerism, it democratised Christianity by allowing the congregation to have direct experiences of God without having to go through the clergy. In England, this would find expression in the setting up of trade unions modelled on the structures of Methodist societies. In America it created a democratic mindset that formed the foundation for the American Revolution and Independence.

The other key figure in the First Great Awakening was Jonathan Edwards, still viewed by many today as America’s greatest ever theologian. Edwards, like Whitefield, was a Calvinist, but his method of preaching was much less emotional
The Son Also Rises in the West

than Whitefield’s. He used to read his sermons in a very dispassionate style while standing motionless - yet his preaching swept many into the Kingdom of God. In 1741 he preached what is probably the most famous sermon in American history, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Some of his hearers were so affected by his words that they ran to the pillars of the church building and clung on to them, feeling that at any moment the floor would subside underneath them and drag them down into perdition.

Many Christians disagree about what actually constitutes a ‘revival.’ Some believe that a revival is when large numbers of unchurched people are drawn into the Kingdom of God. Others insist that a revival is primarily God restoring life to those who are already Christians. As I once heard English preacher Colin Urquhart say, “You can’t re-vive something unless it was already ‘vived’ in the first place!” The First Great Awakening was this second type of revival. Those impacted by the preaching of the likes of Whitefield and Edwards were already church members, but now their faith became something that was living and vibrant.

A Shaking and Shifting of the Religious Landscape

Many denominations were impacted by this awakening. It shook up the Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Reformed Churches, but left the Anglicans and the Quakers mostly unmoved. The real beneficiaries of the Awakening were the initially few Baptists and the Methodists who, from this point on, saw unprecedented growth. This was because their structures were still flexible enough to accommodate the emotional involvement of the Awakening, as well as the emphasis on a direct work of the Spirit by-passing the clergy.
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The older churches were rooted in Europe, still followed the old world’s patterns, and looked back to Europe for spiritual leadership. For example, huge numbers of Presbyterian settlers had immigrated from Scotland and Northern Ireland. Initially they were solidly committed to their Presbyterianism. But, in order to be ordained as a minister in the Presbyterian Church, it was often seen as necessary to be a university graduate. And, particularly in the South, where many of the Scots-Irish settled, universities were few and far between. This lack of qualified ministers greatly limited the number of Presbyterian churches that could be founded. Therefore, it is not surprising that many of the Scots-Irish ended up in Baptist and Methodist congregations, which were multiplying much more rapidly under the leadership of pastors who had never been to university.

Similar dynamics operated among the Congregationalists who had migrated from England, and the Reformed Christians who had arrived from Holland and Germany. Once they had been touched by the First Great Awakening, they were much more likely, within a generation or two, to end up as Baptists or Methodists.

The fluidity of Christianity in this period, with people switching from one church to another, meant that America would arrive at Independence with no one religious denomination dominating the others. This pretty much guaranteed that the Church and the State would be kept separate, with no one version of Christianity being imposed. For example, the Founding Fathers included Anglicans, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Quakers, Unitarians, Deists, Dutch Reformed, Huguenots, Methodists, Lutherans and Catholics.
The Son Also Rises in the West

William Wilberforce

One major consequence of England’s Methodist revival and America’s First Great Awakening was an increasing awareness of the practical and social implications of being a Christian. If being a Christian meant more than simply being born in a ‘Christian country,’ then surely the believers’ life should mark them out as being somehow different from those who had not experienced Christ? One of the best illustrations of this developing Christian social conscience is the life of William Wilberforce (1759-1833), the son of a prosperous merchant in Hull, England.

At nine years old, after the death of his father, Wilberforce was sent to London to live with his Uncle and Aunt. They were considered part of the Methodist revival, having been converted by the preaching of George Whitefield, and this made a strong impression on the young boy (at that time all evangelicals were called ‘Methodists’ rather than members of any one denomination). However, Wilberforce’s grandfather was against this evangelical influence, and intervened to have the boy brought back to Hull. Wilberforce went on to become an MP, a close friend of the Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger, and a gifted public speaker.

It seemed as if Wilberforce’s childhood connections with the followers of Whitefield had been forgotten, but in 1785 he experienced a profound conversion to Christianity. This led him to question whether he should continue in politics, but many friends, including John Newton (a former slave ship captain and author of the hymn ‘Amazing Grace’), persuaded him that he could do as much good for God in Parliament as he could as a preacher.
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Wilberforce pursued many charitable and moral causes. He was, for example, one of the founders of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (later to become the RSPCA, Britain’s largest animal welfare organisation). But he is chiefly remembered as being the prime mover in the abolition movement against the North Atlantic slave trade.

The transportation of slaves from Africa to the Caribbean and North America was a hugely profitable business. Over a period of about 200 years, 11 million Africans had been shipped across the Atlantic in appalling conditions. It is estimated that over 10% of them died during the voyages. Initially it was the Quakers who were the most vocal opponents of slavery, but Wilberforce was able to build a coalition of Evangelicals and others who could use their political influence to lobby for the ending of the trade. It took 21 years, but after an epic political struggle the Slave Trade Act finally abolished the trans-Atlantic transportation of slaves in 1807. The final emancipation of slaves in all British territories did not follow until 1833, with Wilberforce receiving news of it when he was gravely ill. He died the next day having achieved his lifetime’s goal.
The Lord Raises Up Standards

11

THE LORD RAISES UP
STANDARDS
(How We Ended Up with Altar Calls,
Megachurches and Mass Evangelism)

“When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him.” (Isaiah 59:19)

Portrait of a Victorian Evangelical Anarchist

I almost cry with pent-up pathos when I see your saintly, glowing face, haloed by long grey hair; your slightly world-weary, empathetic eyes half-hidden by an unkempt, elvish beard; tilted, your work-weary head palm-proped; heart-broken with biblical compassion for the ragged paupers and the prostitutes. Vigorously you denounced the sex slavers, the wretched work-house tyranny threat; you broke chains, fully-freed debtor families.

Your army marched through tenement streets, defiant your war cry slogan: Blood and Fire! March on, march on for King Jesus! Beat hard! - you marching drum. Blow hard! - brass band salvation songs!

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Shake loud! - rhythmmed, ribboned tambourines.
Lift high those brave pilgrim banners.

Slander-shouting drunks, acting obscene,
blasphemed, tossing ship rockets, flaring
against flesh and fabric of the Sally lassies.
Thugs baptising your disciplined troops
with sulphuric incense, hot, molten tar.
Your soldiers were beaten senseless,
weaving their surreal spit and snot medals
with pride and honour for their Captain.

This sorry world, this Christ-less chaotic canvas,
you overlaid with mercy's big-brush strokes.
Battled-bruised but almost-happy at eighty years:
finally the promise, you were promoted to glory.
Thousands of upright citizens attended
your funeral (even Queen Victoria) -
you'd have wept with joy seeing so many
sincere, heartbroken Victorian victims:
tramps, thieves, murderers and prostitutes.
Whom society hated you anarchically loved;
you'd have deeply treasured the harlot's
carnations, impulsively thrown on your coffin-lid,
much more than any earnest, evangelical eulogy…

Luis Palau, the 20th Century Argentine evangelist, once
produced a movie called ‘God Has No Grandchildren.’ That
slogan is particularly true of Christianity as the hold of
Christendom weakens. Since the Enlightenment, it has no longer
been the case in Europe or North America that a new generation
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will automatically follow the faith of their parents. The Methodist Revival and the First Great Awakening were enormously influential movements, but they could not guarantee that the Church would prosper in future generations. By the middle of the 19th Century, Christianity found itself in crisis once more. A new movement within theology had risen to the fore.

Theological Liberalism

Theological liberalism was the grandchild of the Enlightenment. Remember that one of the Enlightenment’s key tenets was that truth must be determined by observing testable facts, not by being revealed to man either by the Holy Spirit or by the Bible. This approach was extended to the study of the Bible itself. Anything that spoke of the miraculous or a genuine revelation from God was summarily rejected.

So, for example, if a passage in Isaiah spoke of something that would not happen until long after Isaiah’s death (such as the prophecy of Cyrus in Isaiah 45), then the assumption was made that the passage could not possibly have been written by Isaiah himself. After all, reasoned the liberals, it was impossible for anyone to predict a future event, wasn’t it? Therefore, they concluded, the Book of Isaiah must have had portions inserted into it at a much later date.

It is significant that liberal theology initially emerged in those areas which had been largely untouched by either the Methodist Revival or the First Great Awakening. German thinkers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher had grown up in an environment where the Lutheran and Reformed churches had largely abandoned pietism (which concentrates on experiencing God) in favour of rationalism (talking about God). Soon the theology espoused by
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Schleiermacher and others, such as Albrecht Ritschl, was rewriting the Bible with all references to the supernatural removed. They spoke of ‘the Jesus of History’ - who turned out to be a poor misunderstood Galilean, who preached a message that men should love one another, but whose followers subsequently made up all sorts of miraculous tales about Him.

It must be stressed that the liberal theologians’ theories were totally dependent on their own anti-supernatural presuppositions. They started off by excluding the miraculous, and then presented their conclusions as if they had somehow disproved the miracles. This is what we call a circular argument. Another weakness in theological liberalism is that it is hopelessly subjective, or based on the opinions of the theologian. Historically Christianity has been objective, meaning that the Bible is authoritative irrespective of one’s personal opinion. Indeed, the times when the Church most lost its way in history have been when the clear objective meaning of the Bible was obscured or evaded by subjective methods of interpretation such as Thomas Aquinas’ allegorical method. Theological liberalism effectively abandoned the idea that man should be shaped in God’s image, and instead tried to reinvent God in man’s image.

Yet many people listened to it and were persuaded by it. Liberal theology became popular in the US through Unitarians such as William Channing, and in England through Anglican clergy like Baden Powell (the father of Lord Robert Baden-Powell, founder of the Scouting Movement).

The influence of theological liberalism caused churches to be greatly lacking in spiritual power. Understandably this caused more and more people to turn away from the Church altogether. Why bother even going to church if the whole institution is based
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on an outdated worldview and a text that is full of mistakes and untrue stories? This meant that large numbers of people were now totally unchurched. The time was ripe for a different kind of revival. The Methodist Revival and the First Great Awakening were all about reviving those who were members of churches but who had lost the presence of God. But now theological liberalism had come in like a flood, and there was a need for God to raise up standards that could draw the unchurched to Christ. There was a need for a Second Great Awakening.

Charles Finney

The perceptive reader will have guessed, given that we’ve frequently referred to the First Great Awakening, that there was going to be a Second Great Awakening. The most prominent figure in this movement was Charles Finney (1792-1875). Finney was a Presbyterian minister, but rejected that denomination’s Calvinism. He is known as ‘The Father of Modern Revivalism.’

He differed from ministers such as Edwards and Whitefield in his use of extemporaneous preaching. This is where a preacher does not have their sermon planned out word-for-word, but allows the Spirit to inspire them and direct their thoughts while they are preaching. It is not a case of being totally unprepared, for the preacher has already determined the subject and may already have a brief outline of the main points, but they tend to elaborate on those points, and to introduce stories and illustrations, in a much less structured way. The key advantage of this style of preaching is that it can come across as more natural, and even conversational. This can be very effective in reaching unchurched people who often find a more formal style of sermon delivery to sound artificial.
Altar Calls

Finney also introduced an innovation known as ‘the anxious seat.’ This was an empty pew placed close to the pulpit where people would go and sit as a public sign that they were responding to the message of the Gospel. Gradually the practice evolved so that people, rather than sitting at this empty pew, would kneel before it in prayer. Interestingly, in some denominations, such as the Salvation Army, this empty pew is still called ‘the mercy seat,’ even though everyone kneels at it and it would be considered most odd if someone actually sat on it! Finney’s anxious seat is considered to be the origin of the modern day ‘altar call,’ where those responding to the Gospel either stand, raise their hand or make their way to the front, and are encouraged to pray to receive Christ as Saviour (often referred to as ‘The Sinner’s Prayer’). This method of evangelism has often been criticised, primarily by those from a Calvinist background who feel it places too much emphasis on the free will of the convert to choose Christ, and not enough emphasis on the sovereign grace of God. However, it can be viewed as simply a modern-day application of how the apostle Peter encouraged his hearers, on the Day of Pentecost, to be baptised as a public confession of their faith and repentance (Acts 2:37-40).

Finney had good scriptural support for his use of the anxious seat. The New Testament does indicate that a public confession of Christ’s lordship should accompany the faith we have in our hearts (Romans 10:9). In fairness to his critics, coming as they do from the Calvinist wing of the Church, it could be argued that the practice of the altar call is much more consistent with Arminianism than it is with Calvinism. This is because Arminians, in stressing the role of our free will in receiving Christ, usually
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believe that it is necessary for us to remain in a position of faith to be saved. However, Calvinists usually hold to a doctrine of eternal security, or ‘once-saved-always-saved.’ It can be readily seen that the practice of ‘praying the sinner’s prayer,’ combined with ‘once-saved-always-saved,’ could easily produce converts who have never been genuinely transformed by Christ, yet think they are secure on the basis of muttering a prayer on a one-off basis.

Finney was also notable for his clear and explicit teaching on holiness, which basically continued Wesley’s idea of a Second Blessing, or Baptism of the Spirit, which gave the believer a new experience of sanctification. He was also active in opposing slavery, and advancing the cause of women and racial minorities. When he became President of Oberlin College in Ohio, that institution was one of the first to educate women and blacks alongside white men. It has been estimated that throughout his ministry Finney led over 500,000 people to faith in Christ. Stories abounded about the presence of the Spirit in his meetings. It is reported that on one occasion he visited a factory and, without him speaking a word, factory workers began to fall to their knees besides their machines and to repent of their sins.

Camp Meetings

Another feature of the Second Great Awakening that would have a lasting influence on the American Church was the development of Camp Meetings. These were an adaption of an old Scottish event called ‘The Holy Fair,’ where people would come from far and wide twice a year to celebrate communion. The great Scots poet, Robert Burns, wrote a poem ‘The Holy Fair’ that exposes some of the hypocrisy and the immorality that
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went on side-by-side with those who had sincerely gathered to worship at such events.  

The first great Camp Meeting in the US was at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in 1801. As many as 20,000 people gathered—predominantly Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians from a Scots-Irish background. There were many unusual physical manifestations ascribed to the Holy Spirit at Cane Ridge, including speaking in tongues. The Camp Meetings played an important role in the development of churches in the South Eastern United States, helping create what we now know as the Bible Belt. The Camp Meetings were also great social gatherings in an age when entertainments were limited in rural areas. As with the Scottish Holy Fairs described by Robert Burns, there were people who attended Camp Meetings for less than spiritual purposes. For example, in John Steinbeck’s ‘The Grapes of Wrath’ (itself named after the line of a popular Camp Meeting song) we read about the Reverend Casy, a former preacher who boasted how, at Camp Meetings, he would “take one of them girls out in the grass.”

Perhaps one of the greatest lasting legacies of the Second Great Awakening was the development of African-American churches in the South. This was because many of the evangelists preached to blacks and whites alike. The other great legacy was that Arminian forms of Christianity, such as Methodists and Holiness churches who stressed the role of free will in responding to the Gospel, became part of the mainstream of American culture.
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Charles Spurgeon

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, God was also raising up standards in Britain to challenge the growing influence of liberal theology. One of the key figures was a young teenage preacher called Charles Haddon Spurgeon who would become known as ‘The Prince of Preachers.’

At the age of 19 Spurgeon was appointed as pastor of the New Park Street Baptist Chapel in Southwark, London. This was a stunning responsibility to be given to one so young. Yet he rose to the challenge and quickly became the most famous preacher of his day. His congregation outgrew their building, and soon he was preaching to crowds of 10,000 or more in public buildings such as music halls. In 1861 the congregation moved into a new building and became the Metropolitan Tabernacle.

Spurgeon died at the age of just 57, but during his ministry he preached over 3,500 sermons to about 10 million people.91 He used to prepare his sermons in full, but would then preach from a simple outline, using a method similar to Charles Finney. His printed sermons used to sell 25,000 copies each week. He was a fierce critic of liberal theology and was involved in what became known as ‘The Downgrade Controversy,’ where he accused some Baptists of compromising biblical truth.

In the long term, Spurgeon paved the way for the trend in many modern churches where the preacher is much better known than the congregation that he pastors. Spurgeon was a larger than life character, whose preaching style was viewed as vulgar by traditionalists. He also upset some other Christians with his love for cigars, claiming that he “smoked to the glory of God!”92 The Metropolitan Tabernacle was the forerunner of today’s mega-
churches, but its membership decreased somewhat after Spurgeon’s death.

The Salvation Army

A contemporary of Spurgeon’s was William Booth, a Methodist minister from Nottingham who wanted to concentrate on evangelism. His denomination insisted on appointing him to a pastorate, rather than allowing him to evangelise full time, so Booth left to become an independent evangelist. One day in 1865, after preaching outside the Blind Beggar pub in East London, he went home and announced to his wife, “I have found my destiny!”

Booth established the Salvation Army, an evangelistic movement organised on quasi-military lines. It faced initial persecution from both established religion and the liquor trade, but grew rapidly to become a worldwide denomination. The Salvation Army, which started among the poor in the slums of east London, had a strong social conscience dimension. They set up soup kitchens and shelters for the homeless, maternity hospitals for unmarried mothers, and even a farm where reformed alcoholics could learn skills to set them on their feet again. At that time match factories were notorious for low wages and dangerous working conditions, so Booth set up his own match factory, where workers were treated much better, and sold ‘Darkest England Matches.’

In Darkest England and the Way Out was a book by William Booth that graphically described the poverty and vice of Victorian English cities, and offered innovative suggestions for change. There is an old proverb that says, ‘Give a man a fish, and you feed him for one day. Teach him how to fish, and you feed
William Booth was one of the first Christians to go beyond doling out charity to actually address the root causes of poverty and immorality. In this he can be seen as the forerunner of the many projects today where Christians are involved in social justice.

An example of the Salvation Army’s innovative methods can be seen in the ‘Maiden Tribute’ controversy. Child abuse and childhood prostitution were a huge problem in Victorian England. The age of consent was just 13, and children under 8 were thought to be too young to give evidence against their abusers. William Booth’s son, Bramwell, co-operated with W.T. Stead, the editor of the Pall Mall Gazette, in a campaign to have the age of consent raised. They actually bought a young girl from the streets for five pounds to demonstrate that a form of slavery still existed in Great Britain. Stead ended up being sentenced to three months in prison, but the resultant publicity achieved their goal and the age of consent was raised to 16. The purchase of the girl provided the inspiration for George Bernard Shaw’s play ‘Pygmalion’ – later to be adapted as the movie ‘My Fair Lady’.

The Victorian era saw many other evangelical Christians getting involved in tackling poverty and injustice. Lord Shaftsbury used his position in parliament to pass laws improving working conditions in factories and coal mines, and Thomas Barnardo set up homes for orphaned children. But many Christians still saw the divisions between the wealthy and the poor as ordained by God. So, for example, when Cecil Frances Alexander wrote her hymn, ‘All Things Bright and Beautiful’ in 1858, it included the verse: “The rich man in his castle, The poor man at his gate, God made them high or lowly, And ordered their estate.”
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The Salvation Army, in doctrinal terms, followed Methodism in both their Arminianism (emphasising the role of free will in salvation), and in their continuing Wesley’s holiness teaching. However, one major difference was that the Salvationists do not observe baptism or the Lord’s Supper, a non-sacramental approach shared only by the Quakers among major denominations. More of William Booth’s innovations were the use of brass bands for worship (perfect for open air meetings in the days before microphones or amplifiers), and setting spiritual lyrics to popular music hall songs. In 1882 he famously asked, “Why should the devil have all the best tunes?”

Booth’s wife, Catherine, was a gifted preacher and proponent of female ministers, and the movement has always had a large number of women preachers. It is often thought that Booth coined the quote, “My best men are women,” but it appears that it may actually have been Phineas Bresee, founder of the Church of the Nazarene. What is certain is that holiness churches, such as the Salvationists and the Nazarenes, were pioneers in placing women into ministry.

Dwight Moody

Any account of the progress of the Gospel in the 19th Century, either in the US or Britain, would be totally deficient if it neglected the life and ministry of Dwight L. Moody. In 1855, as an 18-year old clerk in a shoe store in Boston, Moody was won for Christ by his Sunday School teacher, Edward Kimball. Two years later he was ministering in the back alleys of Chicago. An eye-witness described these early meetings:

The first meeting I ever saw him at was in a little old shanty that had been abandoned by a saloon-keeper. Mr. Moody had got the place to
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hold the meetings in at night. I went there a little late; and the first thing I saw was a man standing up with a few tallow candles around him, holding a negro boy, and trying to read to him the story of the Prodigal Son and a great many words he could not read out, and had to skip. I thought, ’If the Lord can ever use such an instrument as that for His honour and glory, it will astonish me.’

The Lord certainly did use such an instrument for His honour and glory! As a result of Moody’s tireless labour, within a year the average attendance at his school was 650, while 60 volunteers from various churches served as teachers. It became so well known that the recently-elected President Lincoln visited and spoke at a Sunday School meeting on November 25, 1860.

Moody was involved in ministering to the Union troops on the front line during the American Civil War. It is hard for us today to understand the influence the Civil War had on American religion. It was the first large scale industrial war, with railroads, mass-produced weapons and trench warfare. The huge deaths suffered in the war (10% of young adult males in the North and 30% in the South) caused Christians to dwell much more on what the afterlife was like. It was at this period that preaching on heaven began to dwell more on being reunited with loved ones rather than on spending eternity worshiping God. It is also likely that the war was a primary factor in Moody’s decision to expand his evangelistic ministry.

Moody started a church in Chicago (now known as ‘The Moody Memorial Church’) but he is better remembered for the huge evangelistic rallies he conducted with the gifted singer, Ira D. Sankey. For 27 years Moody/Sankey Gospel meetings on both sides of the Atlantic drew crowds of up to 30,000 to stadia and public halls. Just as the Civil War was the first large scale
industrial war, you could describe Moody as the first large scale industrial evangelist! His use of some of Charles Finney’s methods, such as the altar call, as part of a cohesive strategy, marks him out as the forerunner for the kind of highly organised mass evangelism that would prove so effective in the 20th Century, with evangelists such as Billy Graham and Reinhard Bonnke.

Adventism

A major feature of religion in Great Britain and the US in the 19th Century was the rise of Adventism, in its original meaning of an increased interest in the Second Coming of Christ. There have always been times in history when Christians have felt that they were living in the last days. For example, in the years leading up to 1000 AD many people expected the end of the world. But in the 1800s the Second Great Awakening, and the general excitement it caused, created an atmosphere where such speculation multiplied.

William Miller was a Baptist preacher from Massachusetts who carried out numerous calculations, based primarily on the Books of Daniel and Revelation, and managed to persuade up to 100,000 followers that Christ would return in 1844. When the appointed day came and went, Miller acknowledged his error, but others, most notably Ellen White, adapted his teachings to found the Seventh Day Adventists - a movement that still observes Saturday as the Sabbath day and follows many Old Testament dietary restrictions.

But many other Christians continued to speculate about when the Second Coming would occur, and to construct elaborate theories around the exact timing and nature of the Rapture, the
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Great Tribulation and the Millennium. This trend has been increasing ever since and, to judge by the popularity of the ‘Left Behind’ novels in the US, it continues unabated today.

The 19th Century was also a time when many false religious cults arose. The Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons and Christian Scientists all started around this time. This should not surprise us. If God raises up a standard, then you can be sure that Satan will attempt to confuse the issue with false standards! Indeed, the period of the Early Church, when God was powerfully at work, was also the time when false cults such as Gnosticism and Docetism proliferated.

The Baptism of the Spirit

However, even while the newer cults of the 19th Century were forming, there was also an increased hunger for holiness and spiritual power among Christians. More and more believers followed Finney and the Salvation Army in adopting John Wesley’s doctrine of a Second Blessing from the Holy Spirit. Preachers and authors such as Phoebe Palmer, William Boardman and Hannah Whitall Smith spoke of an experience that would radically transform believers’ lives. In Great Britain, the Keswick Conventions and the Faith Mission reflected such teachings. Increasingly this movement began to teach that this second Blessing would not stop at holiness, but would also include manifestations such as physical healing and other miraculous events.

There had always been movements throughout Church History that had similar expectations. The Montanists were a group in the 2nd Century that sought to maintain the charismatic gifts when they were declining in the rest of the Church. They
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were condemned as heretics, but one of their converts was the noted Church father Tertullian. The Waldensians in 13th Century Italy had similar experiences. At the Cane Ridge Camp Meeting in 1801 there were many supernatural manifestations including speaking in tongues. In 1890 a healing evangelist, Maria Woodworth-Etter, reported that people had begun speaking in tongues at a revival in St. Louis. In 1896 a group of believers meeting at the Shearer Schoolhouse, in Cherokee County, North Carolina had a similar experience. About 100 of those present claimed to have been baptised with the Spirit and spoke in tongues. That group would later become the Church of God, one of the major Pentecostal denominations.

Then, as 1900 was drawing to a close, a group of students were meeting in a Bible School in Topeka, Kansas. Charles Parham, the principle of the school, told the students to study the Bible, and to try to determine what evidence might be expected if they received the gift of the Holy Spirit mentioned in Acts 2:38. After three days the students collectively agreed, on the basis of other passages in the Book of Acts, that speaking in tongues would constitute such evidence. So, on New Year’s Eve, Parham and the students met to pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit. After midnight, on the first day of a new Century, a student called Agnes Ozman began to speak in an unknown language she had never spoken before. The other students thought it was Chinese! Shortly afterward Parham and 34 other students received a similar experience. The 20th Century of Church History had started!

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REVIEW OF BOOK THREE

(CLAWING THEIR WAY BACK TO THE SURFACE)

We have just covered six important centuries of Church History in only four Chapters. This inevitably means that we have skimmed over, and perhaps omitted entirely, some very important movements and figures. Some readers may well question the time and space that has been devoted to different aspects of this story.

For example, when looking at the 19th Century we gave more space to discussing Charles Finney and William Booth than we did to Charles Spurgeon. Yet Spurgeon was probably a much better known personality in his day than were either Finney or Booth. But remember the point of this whole exercise. We are concentrating on the people and events that helped bring us to where we are today. While Spurgeon was indeed the ‘Prince of Preachers,’ and his popularity in Victorian London was truly impressive, that has not necessarily shaped the Church as we see it today. But both Finney and Booth introduced innovations that have greatly influenced the course of Christianity over the last 150 years, and so helped us get to where we are now.

One important feature of this section has been the way in which God used personal social networks, as he did in the first 250 years of the Church, to introduce great change. To be sure, the kings and rulers have still played an important role - for
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example it was due to the protection of Frederick III of Saxony that Luther did not end up burned at the stake like Hus. But we also see the power of individuals to change the course of history. This can be illustrated by the following. Wycliffe tried to get back to a more biblical Christianity in 14th Century England, thus influencing the servants of Ann of Bohemia, who in turn influenced Jan Hus in Central Europe. The followers of Hus ended up as the Moravians living on Zinzendorf’s estate in Saxony. The Moravian missionaries were instrumental in the conversion of John Wesley, who is credited with saving England from a violent revolution, such as occurred in France. Meanwhile Wesley’s old university friend, George Whitefield, was used in the First Great Awakening, a movement that is seen as instrumental in leading to the American War of Independence and the formation of the United States. Then Whitefield’s converts in England are used by God to influence William Wilberforce, thus leading to the eventual abolition of the North Atlantic slave trade and eventually of slavery itself. So we have an unbroken chain of personal contacts and friendships that lead from Wycliffe to Wilberforce and encompass some of the most important events in world history.

Recommended Further Reading

Christianity’s Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution - A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First by Alister McGrath (HarperOne,2007). This is a history and analysis of Protestantism from Luther to the present day.

God’s Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible by Adam Nicolson (Harper Collins,2003). A wonderful account of the
politics and the backroom deals that were involved in producing the KJV.

**A Short History of the Moravian Church** by J.E. Hutton. Originally published in 1845, this is a detailed history of this key movement. It is also in the public domain, so you can easily get it as a free e-book online.


**The General Next to God: The Story of William Booth and the Salvation Army** by Richard Collier (Collins, 1965). Now only available second-hand - but much better than some more recent biographies of William Booth.

**Azusa Street** by Frank Bartleman (Whitaker House, 2000). An eye-witness account of the Azusa Street Pentecostal Revival.
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BOOK FOUR

THE SAVIOUR OF THE WHOLE WORLD

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29)

You could be forgiven, having reached this point, for assuming that we are about to launch into the final era of Church History so far - the events of the Twentieth Century and the small segment we have experienced so far of the Twenty First. But that would be to get ahead of ourselves, for there is an untold story that lies beyond our narrow geographical field of vision.

Jesus came as the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world, not just the sin of the west! In the beginning, of course, Christianity was a faith of the Middle East. It flourished in Egypt, North Africa, and Asia Minor. Some of the key figures in the first few Chapters of our story, such as Tertullian and Augustine, were African. Yet today many people, even those living in the regions of the world that were the cradle of the Church, see Christianity as a western religion.

Many books that set out to tell the story of Church History really only tell half the story. They often concentrate on Christianity in the West, but barely touch on the rest of the world, from the time when Augustine arrives on the scene until
the colonial era, when Europeans began exporting their versions of Christianity to other continents.

This book, some may say, suffers from the same defect - but we have more of an excuse than most in that our intent and focus is very specific. We are not attempting to give a comprehensive account of Church History. We are exploring those movements, events and personalities that have had the greatest influence in shaping the Church of today. We are trying to work out how on earth we ended up here!

Like it or not, despite the impressive history and rich traditions of churches in Constantinople, Russia, Armenia or Ethiopia, western Christianity has had a much greater influence on the global Church than anything else. So, for example, it doesn’t matter if I am travelling in China, Indonesia, Latin America, or Africa. I find that the most rapidly expanding forms of Christianity are readily recognisable. Churches led by national leaders, not foreign missionaries, teach doctrines that were formulated by the likes of Luther and Calvin, sing hymns and choruses in a way that was popularised by Charles Wesley, make altar calls in the manner of Finney and Moody, engage in social outreach programs that would be very familiar to William Booth, and prophesy like the early Pentecostals. Similarly, I see Catholic churches in every part of the world that clearly stand in the tradition of Ambrose, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

It is true that you can go to the US or the UK and find Russian Orthodox churches, or Armenian congregations - but generally they are primarily ministering to immigrants, or their descendants, from their homelands. These other forms of Christianity have not become universal in the ways that Catholicism and Protestantism have. The reasons for this
phenomenon are, of course, debatable. Is it simply part of the overall globalisation and dominance of western culture - in the same way that we see McDonald’s or Pizza Hut all over the world? Or is it more than that? Have these western forms of Christianity evolved a ‘translatability’ that enables them to thrive in new contexts, in a kind of ‘survival of the fittest’ natural selection among religions?

That particular argument lies beyond the scope of this book, but what is certain, is that we must look mainly toward Church History in Europe and North America to understand how on earth we ended up here, just as we should probably look to the rest of the world when it comes to understanding where the Church is going to go in the future!

Nevertheless, this is not to say that we neglect other versions of Christianity altogether. So in these next Chapters we will look at some of the worldwide story so far, for it still has much to teach us about how the Church of Jesus Christ can move forwards in both Christendom settings, and also in contexts where believers are very much in the minority.
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WHEN CREEDS BECAME CANCERS
(How We Ended Up with Church Politics and Heresy Hunters)

“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”
(Ephesians 4:3)

In Chapter Four (‘The Faith’), we saw how the early Church developed Creeds, or agreed Declarations of Faith, to sum up biblical truths and to guard against error. We also saw that, as time went by, the Creeds tended to grow as the Church understood more and encountered more false teachings. But there’s one big problem with Creeds and Declarations of Faith - you need to know when to stop! Otherwise you end up condemning as a heretic every single person who disagrees with you concerning the tiniest and most insignificant details.

Ecclesiastical Cancer

It may be helpful at this point to use a medical illustration. The human body is composed of millions of cells. Cells are good and necessary. Indeed, they are the very building blocks of life. But cells die, and so our bodies are continually creating new cells as required. Once there are enough cells to replace the dead ones then our bodies somehow know that it is time to stop creating new cells. But sometimes something goes wrong and, for some
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reason, the signals that stop cell production don’t work. This means that our bodies produce too many cells, which then crowd out healthy cells and form tumours. And so, when our bodies don't know when to stop cell production, we end up with the misery caused by cancer.

The ecclesiastical equivalent to cancer happened in the 5th Century. Once the Church had got into the habit of having Councils and making Creeds, they didn’t know when to stop. As the Creeds became more detailed, then more and more people found themselves cast out of the Church and branded as heretics. What had started out as something good (helping the Church think in ways that were consistent with biblical truth), ended up as something deadly and destructive (persecuting those who didn’t conform to one possible interpretation of biblical truth).

Christological Controversy

Let’s take the same example we used in Chapter Four - what the Church taught about the Person and Nature of Christ. We said that the New Testament makes some clear statements about God and about Jesus that can be summed up as follows:

1. There is only one God.
2. Jesus Christ is God.
3. Jesus Christ was a man.
4. The Holy Spirit is God.
5. Jesus Christ is not God the Father.
6. Jesus Christ is not the Holy Spirit.
7. The Holy Spirit is not God the Father.

We saw how Docetism, Tritheism, Modalism, Adoptionism and Arianism all failed to do justice to these seven biblical truths. We also saw that the doctrine of the Trinity, while not explicitly
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taught in Scripture, is the best, if not the only, explanation that can hold all these truths together. Therefore, it made sense for the early Church to draw the doctrine of the Trinity from the biblical truths, and, unless something better were to come along, to include it in their Creeds so as to better identify and avoid false teachings.

But what if people were to start speculating about the Person and Nature of Christ in ways that caused disagreement, but were still consistent with the seven core biblical truths we outlined above?

Nestorianism

Nestorius (386-451 AD), an Archbishop of Constantinople, was originally schooled in Antioch. He objected to Mary being referred to as theokatos, or ‘God-bearer.’ After all, Nestorius argued, if God the Son existed for all eternity before Mary miraculously conceived, then how could she be the mother of God? So Nestorius proposed that Mary was the mother of Christ (the human nature of Jesus), but not the mother of God (the divine nature of Jesus). He thought of Jesus Christ as having two natures within Him, one human and one divine, but that both natures remained distinct - like oil and water that are poured into a glass but remain separate.

Cyril of Alexandria (whom the attentive reader will remember from the murder of Hypatia in Chapter Six) believed that the two natures of Christ were joined together - like wine and water which fully mix together in a glass. Also, since Mary was particularly venerated in Alexandria, he attacked Nestorius as much to defend Mary’s honour as to preserve sound doctrine. Cyril claimed that Nestorius was teaching that Christ possessed
two distinct persons, as distinct from two natures. If you’re finding this a bit confusing don’t worry, pretty much everybody at the time managed to confuse themselves as well, particularly since some were more at home with Latin than Greek, and the distinction between a ‘person’ and a ‘nature’ doesn’t always translate very well!

In the end it didn’t really matter what the Bible said. The dispute descended into a territorial squabble between the schools of Antioch and Alexandria, with other Bishops and Patriarchs using the whole messy controversy to settle old scores and increase their power bases. Different Councils were convened where the results varied depending on who could pack each Council with their own supporters, or find the biggest gang of monks to intimidate and beat up their opponents. Everybody condemned everyone else as heretics at some stage of the process.

Today the western churches (both Protestant and Catholic) and the Orthodox churches in the east, all accept the rulings of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, which makes us tend to think that everything got sorted out neatly. But in reality nothing could be further from the truth. Controversy continued to rage for another 300 years. The Council of Chalcedon basically said that both Nestorius and Cyril were wrong. It affirmed that in Christ two natures were united in one person, and that these natures could neither be confused nor divided. Nestorianism (now viewed as teaching that Christ had two separate personalities) was condemned as a heresy, as was Cyril’s teaching that the two natures were so united as to effectively be viewed as one nature (subsequently known as monophysitism). Some peacemakers tried suggesting a compromise known as
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monothelitism, which suggested that Christ had two natures, but only one will. Just for good measure monothelitism was banned as a heresy also!\(^{103}\)

Creeds as a Weapon

The real problem is that, in all this controversy, the Creeds had become a cancer. They were no longer a good thing to protect the Church from genuine heresy, but had become a destructive force for one faction to attack and even eliminate another. Actually, virtually all of the parties involved still affirmed the seven biblical truths we outlined earlier. They were in total agreement about the Trinity, about Jesus being God, about the Holy Spirit being distinct from the Father etc. Nobody could clearly show from Scripture that one party was right or another party was wrong.

In reality there was room within the biblical teaching for Nestorius to have his opinion and for Cyril to have his opinion too. In a saner world they could have agreed to disagree and still recognised one another as being fellow Christians. After all, this is what George Whitefield and John Wesley would do over a thousand years later when they disagreed about Calvinism and Arminianism. Their disagreements did not stop them from loving one another and respecting each other.

But the stronger a hold Christendom has on a society, the harder it is to act sanely. If religion is going to hold a controlling stake in society, with all the perks and trappings of power that involves, then everyone is going to move heaven and earth to ensure that it is their own particular brand of religion that claims the top spot. Therefore, there is always the temptation to condemn, demonise, and even kill those whose rival version of religion threatens your position of power. This is why Jan Hus
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was burnt at the stake in Central Europe, why Quakers were persecuted in early New England, and why some Sunni Muslims bomb Shia mosques in Iraq.

So, from 451 AD onward, the churches that accepted the definitions of the Council of Chalcedon were the ones that shared the benefits of power with the Roman Empire, with others being pushed to the margins, to the edge of the Empire or even beyond the rule of the authorities altogether. By then the Empire had divided into eastern and western wings, with their respective capitals in Rome and Constantinople. So the two most favoured branches of Christianity developed into the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. But what of the rest? What happened to the dissidents (or ‘heretics,’ depending on your point of view) who refused to accept the rulings of Chalcedon?

Growth and Decline in the East

The Nestorians found a refuge in Persia. Remember that the Persian Empire were the enemies of the Romans, so it made sense for them to welcome a group that the Romans were condemning as heretics. Also, since Christians in Persia had suffered cruel persecution under suspicion of being Roman agents, they saw embracing Nestorianism as a way to avoid such problems in the future. The Nestorians were keen missionaries, and used their new Persian base to establish churches among the Tartars of Central Asia, in India, in Sri Lanka, in Afghanistan, in the Mongol territories, and even in China.

To give an idea of how Nestorianism spread, in 800 AD England had two metropolitans (the Archbishops of York and Canterbury). Yet the Nestorian Church of the East boasted 19
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metropolitans and 85 bishops. They comprised about 25% of all the world’s Christians. In the 10th Century they had 15 metropolitans in lands controlled by the Islamic Rashidun Caliphate. By the end of the 11th Century they were the largest denomination in Christianity, outnumbering the combined totals of Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox believers. Today they are known as the Assyrian Church of the East with headquarters in Chicago and about 170,000 members worldwide. So what happened?

Basically, they were persecuted and harried almost out of existence. Chinese xenophobia under the Ming dynasty in the 14th and 15th Centuries meant that foreigners and foreign religions were suppressed. Also, the conversion to Islam of the Mongol Emperors, including Tamerlane, paved the way for brutal and persistent persecution of the Nestorians.

This explanation tends to be very troubling to us as Christians. Our understanding of Church History, based as it is almost exclusively on the Western Church, has given us the idea that Christianity always triumphs over persecution as a matter of course. After all, isn’t the blood of the martyrs the seed of the Church? That was certainly true for the early Church when persecuted under the Roman Empire - but it has not always been the case. This may be because the Roman persecutions were sporadic and short-lived, whereas the Church of the East suffered sustained persecution over several centuries.

There may also be a more spiritual reason. In Tertullian’s day the Church had been more united. Yes, there had been gnostic heresies and suchlike, but the early Creeds were something that pulled the biblical believers together and protected them from genuine heresies. But remember that now we are looking at a
period where the Creeds had become a cancer. The Church was hopelessly divided. Each branch of Christianity rehearsed past squabbles, and reminded themselves why they were the true Church, and everyone else was a heretic. As Jesus said, “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand” (Matthew 12:25).

Indeed, the modern Assyrian Church of the East, when telling its history, lays less stress on the centuries of persecution, and more on its Schism of 1552, when Franciscan missionaries persuaded some of their key leaders to finally accept the Council of Chalcedon, and affiliate with Rome as the Chaldean Catholic Church.

Monophysite Christianity

The monophysites spread out to the East and also into Africa. In Armenia and Ethiopia they have remained the dominant religion for 1500 years. They also developed as Coptic Christianity in Egypt where they still comprise about 9% of the population. Other strong monophysite communities have survived in Lebanon, Syria, Sudan and India. They prefer to be called ‘miaphysite’ these days, and are often collectively referred to as ‘The Oriental Orthodox Churches’ - not to be confused with the Eastern Orthodox Churches, which we shall consider in the next Chapter.

Today some of these communities are coming under persecution once more from Islamic extremists. Also, in Eritrea Pentecostals are being arrested and tortured in an attempt to force them to convert back to the historically dominant monophysite Oriental Orthodox Church. It seems as if, in some
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parts of the world, Creeds are still operating as a cancerous growth on the Body of Christ.
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We have dwelt extensively on the story of the Western Church over the last 1500 years. Then, in the previous Chapter, we have briefly summarised the story of the Nestorian and monophysite churches that developed to the East of the Empire. But there is, of course, one more segment of Christianity that we have hardly touched on - the Eastern Orthodox Church. It has been their misfortune, for most of their history, to lie at the interface between Christendom and Islam.

**Constantinople**

Constantine had founded a new city in the east, on the site of the existing city of Byzantium, which, with characteristic modesty he named after himself. Constantinople was designed to be a 'second Rome,' and the Roman Empire had become too large and unwieldy to administer as one unit. So the Empire was divided into an Eastern and a Western Empire. The Western Empire declined and finally collapsed in the 5th Century, so for
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the next thousand years the Roman Empire would continue 850 miles to the east of Rome!

Today we refer to this Eastern Empire as ‘the Byzantine Empire,’ to distinguish it from the Western Empire that was headquartered in Rome. But in Constantinople they simply referred to themselves as ‘Romans.’ They may have spoken Greek rather than Latin, but they viewed themselves as the continuation of the Roman Empire. Constantinople grew to become the world’s greatest city, far eclipsing Rome. In 800 AD it had 250,000 inhabitants at a time when the second largest city in Europe (Rome) only had a population of 50,000.\(^\text{109}\)

Constantinople boasted a staggering array of arenas, palaces, churches and public buildings. Robert de Cléry, a 13th Century chronicle of the Crusades, calculated that, over eight centuries, Constantinople had managed to accumulate over two thirds of the property of the entire world!\(^\text{110}\) Its fortifications, a set of walls and moats forty feet high and four miles long, were considered to be impregnable. The glory of the city was its great church - Hagia Sophia. This wonder of the world would remain the largest Cathedral constructed for the next 1000 years. It took 10,000 workers and 20,000 pounds of gold to complete it, and its dome was so large that it was rumoured that only God Himself was holding it in place. In its prime it was staffed by over 600 workers, including 80 priests.\(^\text{111}\)

For a long time, the Churches of Rome and Constantinople competed for the honour of being the headquarters of the Christian faith. Rome claimed historical associations with the apostles Peter and Paul, and of course Rome had been the founding city of the Empire. But Constantinople could claim to be the seat of political power, and its wealth and buildings were
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incomparably greater than those of the decaying city of Rome. So what happened, rather predictably, was that western churches in Europe and North Africa acknowledged the primacy of Rome, whereas eastern churches in Asia Minor looked instead to Constantinople. At the Council of Chalcedon in 451, it was declared that the Bishop of Constantinople was of equal status to the Bishop of Rome.\textsuperscript{112}

Of course both sets of churches were still fully tied in to the whole idea of Christendom and the Church/State union. The main difference here was that the Roman Church took advantage of the weakness of the Western Empire to assert the Church’s role as the senior partner in the arrangement and to pull political strings, whereas the Constantinople Church was content to concentrate on religious matters without interfering in the Emperor’s task of running the State.

The Eastern Empire fought a succession of wars against Slavs, Bulgars and Persians. Eventually it developed a policy of using its great wealth to buy off potential invaders, rather than going through the bloodshed of warfare. This worked fine with various tribes that were mostly interested in acquiring loot in battle - but it left the Empire unprepared for the advent of an enemy that was motivated less by gaining wealth, and more by spreading its own militant religious ideology. For now the struggle between Christianity and Islam was about to get underway.

The Rise of Islam

Muhammad (570-632 AD) was a camel trader from Mecca who founded a new religion in the Arabian peninsula. The Arabian desert, due to its isolation, had become a haven for
various heretical Christian cults. For example, one cult taught that the Trinity consisted of God the Father, Mary as God the Mother, and Jesus as God the Son. Mohammad, reacting to such forms of tritheism, reinterpreted the Bible to produce a fiercely monotheistic faith. His followers waged a series of wars and, against all the odds, seized control of all of Arabia.

Many Christian scholars who encountered Islam in its early centuries, such as John of Damascus (676-749 AD) saw it as a Christian heresy. It was only later that it came to be seen as a separate religion. Christians are also frequently critical of the way in which Islam has spread primarily by violence. For example, in 2006 Pope Benedict XVI gave a speech at the University of Regensburg, in which he quoted an Eastern Emperor to the effect that Islam was a violent religion which was spread by the sword. The speech caused outrage around the world. Churches were bombed and burned in the Middle East, a nun was shot and killed in Somalia, and protesters in London brandished placards calling for the Pope to be executed - all this was apparently to prove that Islam is not a violent religion!

But Islam was simply following the example of Christendom. If Constantine led an army to smash the Donatists as heretics, and if Augustine argued that such action was permissible, then can we really blame Muhammad for using the sword against those whom he saw as heretics? Indeed, many commentators would find it hypocritical that the head of a denomination that burned Jan Hus and William Tyndale at the stake should criticise another religion for using violence. One of the problems with Christendom is that you tend to reap what you sow!

So the followers of Muhammad became the deadly enemies of the Eastern Empire of Constantinople, and the Orthodox
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Church that was headquartered there. Over the next 700 years the territories of the Eastern Empire would wax and wane depending on how successful they were in battle. But gradually, over a long period of time, the Islamic forces gained ground and the city of Constantinople, still heavily fortified, spectacular and wealthy, presided over a shrinking Empire.

The Great Schism

Meanwhile, the Church of Rome and the Church of Constantinople maintained an uneasy truce. They were no longer part of the same Empire, and they did their theology in two different languages (Latin in the West and Greek in the East). So it should not surprise us that they developed in different ways and increasingly had disputes. The Quinisext Council, held in Constantinople in 692 AD, rejected the enforced celibacy of clergy. The Roman Church refused to accept its ruling. In the 8th Century an Eastern Emperor followed a policy of iconoclasm - removing icons from churches and forbidding people to venerate these ‘holy pictures.’ But this action was fiercely criticised by Rome. Then in 867 AD, due to a dispute over who was to be the patriarch of Constantinople, the Eastern Church tried to excommunicate Pope Nicholas I of Rome.

Also, there were territorial squabbles as pagan tribes in the Balkans converted to Christianity. Representatives of both Rome and Constantinople competed for the loyalty of these converts. These squabbles are not just historical curiosities, but still affect people today. For example, part of the slaughter and genocide in the Balkans in the early 1990’s was due to the religious differences between the Serbs and the Croats. The Serbs were Orthodox, since their ancestors had pledged their loyalty to
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Constantinople, whereas the Croats’ ancestors had embraced Rome, leaving them a heritage of Roman Catholicism.

These disputes came to a head in the 11th Century. As often happens in religious disputes, the straw that broke the camel's back was something rather petty. The Western Church was using unleavened bread in their communion services, whereas the bread used in communion in the Eastern Church contained yeast. Since the Jews used unleavened bread in their Passover meals, the Eastern Church accused the Church in Rome of being too Jewish! Pope Leo XI responded in 1054 by sending a delegation, led by Cardinal Humbert, to Constantinople to sort the matter out. Things went from bad to worse when Cardinal Humbert strode into Hagia Sophia during a church service and slapped a declaration onto the altar - declaring that the leaders of the Eastern Church were excommunicated. The Eastern Church responded in similar fashion by excommunicating Cardinal Humbert and his colleagues.

Actually Pope Leo had died before Cardinal Humbert had taken his drastic action, and since his authority to so act had come from Leo, there was some doubt as to whether the excommunication was valid or not. But the dispute had passed the point of no return, so 1054 is remembered as being “The Great Schism.” In reality the two churches had been separate for a long time, but now it was official. There was the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church - each claiming to be the true Church of Jesus Christ.

At this point the Eastern Orthodox Church was still powerful. Constantinople was still the richest and most impressive city in the known world, and the Church was still influential in Asia Minor, with over 1000 bishops in Turkey alone.
However, the continued attacks by Islamic forces gradually reduced this influence.

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The Crusades have often been presented as a case of the Western Church trying to help the Eastern Church, but they merely served to widen the schism. The truth was that the Crusaders found the Orthodox inhabitants of Constantinople to be so oriental in their style of dress and manners that they seemed to be more like the Muslims than like western Christians. The Fourth Crusade was hugely expensive, and the riches of Constantinople were too much of a temptation. A combination of internal politics among the Crusaders, distrust of the Orthodox Christians, and plain old-fashioned greed led to the sack of Constantinople in 1204. The Crusaders looted the city in an orgy of murder and rape. Priceless artefacts were carried away, the churches were desecrated, and French soldiers seated a prostitute on a throne in Hagia Sophia to dance and sing obscene songs.¹¹⁶

As the Islamic threat increased there were attempts to reconcile Rome and Constantinople. Several Eastern Emperors requested military help from Rome and the price demanded was always the same - they must acknowledge the supremacy of the Pope over the entire Church of Jesus Christ. Some Emperors did indeed agree to this, but each time, when they arrived home in Constantinople, they found it impossible to sell such a deal to the people. It was after one such incident that the Orthodox Church in Russia, fed up with such weakness from the leaders of Constantinople, became independent in 1448. They proclaimed that Moscow was now ‘The Third Rome’ (after Rome and

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Constantinople), and began to provide an alternative source of authority and leadership for the Orthodox churches among the Slavs and in the Balkans.\textsuperscript{117}

In 1453 the unthinkable happened, and Constantinople was captured by the Muslim Turks. The city had been in decline for many years - its population had fallen from over 1,000,000 at its peak, to less than 50,000.\textsuperscript{118} The Turks had heavy cannons, and even the fabled walls and fortifications of Constantinople had no answer to this new technology. The Roman Empire, which had lived on in its Eastern incarnation, was finally finished. The lands of the Middle East and North Africa, which had played such a major role in the early centuries of Christianity, would now remain as part of the Islamic world.

The Orthodox Churches

After the Fall of Constantinople, Orthodox Christianity continued in two very different forms. A large number of Orthodox Christians lived, and still live today, as minorities under Muslim rule. Their numbers continued to decline as they were subjected to ongoing discrimination and periodic persecution. Many of them converted to Islam. One reason for this was their feeling that God had deserted them. After all, they reasoned, if Christianity was true then surely God would have given them victory in the battles against the Turks? This is another problem with Christendom. Once you start going to war in the name of God, then you have to face up to the consequences of military defeats. If an omnipotent God really wanted us to fight on His behalf, then surely He would be able to make sure that we won the battles?
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The other way that the Orthodox Church continued was among the Slavic peoples as national churches. At a time when Roman Catholicism was developing as an international movement that transcended national boundaries, Orthodox Christianity produced the likes of the Albanian Orthodox Church, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the Georgian Orthodox Church, the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. This form of Christendom, where people’s religion is intensely tied in with their nationality, has the potential to greatly distort the Gospel of Christ. For example, there was a strong link in the 1990’s between people’s identity in the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the nationalism that provoked acts of genocide and war crimes in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo.

Also, this strong link between nationality and church affiliation helps explain why Eastern Orthodox Christianity has never produced modern missionary movements comparable to those of Protestants and Catholics, and why it has not become a genuinely worldwide movement. You will find Orthodox churches in other parts of the world, but they are predominantly composed of emigrants from Orthodox countries and their descendants.

The Struggle Between Christianity and Islam

The spread of Islam by violent force and conquest overwhelmed the Byzantine Empire, and at one time it seemed as if Christendom might be destroyed altogether. From 711 to 718 AD, Islamic forces conquered Portugal and Spain forming the nation of Al-Andalus. By the early 10th Century it is estimated that a majority of the inhabitants of southern Spain were
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Muslim. Islamic forces also conquered Sicily and Crete and began pushing into France. It is sobering to think of how the world might look today if this expansion had continued unchecked.

A turning point came in 732 AD, at the Battle of Tours. French forces led by Charles Martel (literally ‘Charles the Hammer’) overcame a large Muslim army. The Islamic advance was pushed back into Spain. A long struggle to retake Spain, the Reconquista, lasted for another 770 years before Muslim forces were finally expelled.

After the fall of Constantinople, the Muslim forces of the Ottoman Empire conquered much of Eastern Europe. Indeed, relations between the Catholic and the Orthodox Church had reached such a low point that many Orthodox Christians welcomed the Ottomans. As one Greek politician of the day put it, “Better the Sultan’s turban than the Cardinal’s Hat!” The Ottoman Empire eventually conquered a huge territory that included the modern day borders of Turkey, Albania, Greece, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Romania and Hungary. The turning points in this expansion were two failed attempts to capture Vienna in 1529 and 1532. The Ottoman Empire gradually declined, and was finally ended by the First World War and the treaties which followed. What we see today as ‘the Muslim world’ slowly took its present shape of the Middle East, North Africa, Turkey, Albania and some parts of Asia.

In recent years the interface between Islam and Christianity has once more occupied many people’s attention. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, it seemed to many as if Islam was on the retreat in the face of increasing westernisation and globalisation. However, more radical, or fundamentalist, forms of
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Islam evolved that fed off nationalist and anti-colonial feelings in North Africa and the Middle East. Today some of these Islamic sects have been able to exercise a disproportionate influence by their skilful use of modern media and terrorism. A number of Muslims, albeit a minority, once more yearn for the establishment of caliphates, or Empires, that will spread their faith by the sword. This extremism feeds off anti-western sentiment to target long-established Christian communities in the Middle East. There is a very real danger that, in this generation, Christian communities that have survived in places like Iraq for nearly 2000 years will be wiped out completely.

The Decline of Christendom

Increased Muslim immigration into North America and Europe in the Twentieth and Twenty First Centuries has also coincided with the decline of Christendom. The problem is that many onlookers confuse the decline of Christendom with a decline in Christianity.

Christendom, remember, is that perversion of the faith which, since the time of Constantine, has sought political power and cultural domination of the State. It lessens the importance of the individual’s personal encounter with God, and sees Christianity as being more about belonging to a society, and observing the rules that are handed down from those who are in power. For those who value biblical Christianity, therefore, the decline of Christendom should be a cause for celebration and an opportunity to practice an authentic Christianity.

However, when we fail to understand the history and the nature of Christendom, then its decline can fill us with alarm and foreboding. If people are no longer forced to attend church,
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either by legal sanctions or the pressure of social conformity, then church attendance obviously falls. The numbers who are choosing of their own free will to gather and worship God may not have fallen, indeed they may have increased, but the overall perception is one of empty church buildings.

Similarly, the decline of Christendom means that unbelievers are no longer forced to adhere to Christian standards of morality. Laws are liberalised, so as to permit activities that Christians would see as sinful and which were outlawed under Christendom. While this is uncomfortable for us as believers, it is not necessarily a bad thing. Our calling is to live righteously and proclaim the Gospel to unbelievers, so that they too might come to know Christ, not to force unbelievers to conform to what we see as righteous.

Muslim Immigration and the West

This sense of displacement and loss that accompanies the decline of Christendom is understandable, even if it is misplaced. But it becomes especially potent when it is combined with Muslim immigration. Now we don’t only see empty churches - we also see new mosques being built in cities where there was previously little or no Muslim presence. This can lead to panic and hysteria that ‘the Muslims are taking over!’ Now, add to that already explosive mix the increase of radical Islamic sects and the dangers of terrorist groups such as Al Quaeda. Consider also that immigrant communities tend to have high birth rates. It is easy to see why some people feel threatened. Some rather silly commentators have even talked about Europe becoming ‘Eurabia.’ The facts are very different, and a lot less sensational.
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The numbers of converts to Islam in the western world are statistically insignificant. The combination of empty churches and new mosques does not mean that people are embracing a new faith. The few occasions where non-Muslims convert to Islam usually occur in prisons (where Islam has been successful in providing moral meaning to those whose lives have hit rock bottom), or else where western women fall in love with and marry a Muslim man (such marriages have a higher than average likelihood to end in divorce at which point the woman usually abandons Islam once more). These conversions are probably more than outweighed by the relatively small numbers of nominal Muslims in western society who convert to Christianity. So, there is no reason whatsoever to fear that large numbers of westerners will become Muslims.

Demographics

This means that any increase in the number of Muslims in western societies can be attributed either to immigration, or to an increased birth rate. Again this has been the subject of some rather frenzied speculation, tinged with more than a hint of racism, arguing that ‘indigenous Europeans’ (polite-speak for ‘whites’) are reproducing at a rate below that necessary to maintain their numbers, while Muslim immigrants, with higher birth rates, are multiplying at such a rate that they will become a majority. Such a scenario fails to take several factors into account.

Firstly, western society is not only composed of whites and Muslims. A huge segment of immigrants into western societies are Africans, many of whom are committed Christians. In fact, in many large European cities, African-led churches now comprise the largest religious congregations of any description. So, in many
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parts of post-Christendom Europe, immigration is revitalising and increasing Christianity. These predominantly Christian immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa also maintain high birth rates, thus offsetting the demographic impact of high birth rates among Muslims.

Secondly, there is increasing evidence that second and third generation immigrants tend to become more secular and more integrated into their host societies. In other words, the children and grandchildren of Muslim immigrants tend to be much more moderate in their faith, often becoming Muslim in name only. Their birth rates also tend, within one or two generations, to fall to rates comparable with longer-established ethnic groups.

Scholarly estimates as to the likely numbers of Muslims in western societies in the future vary, but even at the top end of the scale it is considered extremely unlikely that the Muslim population of any Western European country will exceed 15% by 2030. When we consider that a large portion of these will be highly secularised, then it becomes apparent that talk about any Muslim takeover of the West is nothing more than irresponsible fear-mongering.

Indeed, adherents of biblical Christianity should see Muslim immigration to the West as a glorious opportunity, not as a threat. It is extremely difficult for Christian missionaries to reach many parts of the Islamic world, yet now many Muslims are leaving those countries to live in societies where Christians have the freedom to share their faith with such immigrants.

One concern is that ignorant and insular Christians in the West may indeed create the very conditions that they fear. Extremism thrives when communities become marginalised and demonised. By portraying Muslim immigration as a terrible threat,
there is more chance that the Muslim community will perceive itself to be besieged, thus fostering radicalism and violence. Then future generations would be drawn to fundamentalism instead of becoming more secularised. That, in turn, could greatly polarise and complicate relations between Christians and Muslims.
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For God So Loved the World

FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD
(How We Ended Up with Missionaries)

For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

Patrick’s Shrined Bell

Gospel, goblet and simple brass bell
Colum-cille took from Patrick’s grave,
holy clog* that broke the Druids’ spell:
it’s power can heal - but cannot save.

That tocsin toll so feared by royalty**
blessing hindered, the bell hidden
behind beauty, kings reclaimed loyalty;
faith well-controlled, if not forbidden.

Not filigree-patterned, glowing gold,
not gemstones securely embedded,
but the gospel of hope, simply told -
is what the Celtic kings so dreaded.

Bell then buried in an oaken ark,
guarded from priest, common thief;
a Victorian spade hit the mark:
anxious antiquarians sighed relief.
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* clog, tr from Irish = bell
**Patrick’s Bell was considered so holy, or its miraculous powers so uncontrollable, that it had to be shielded from mortal gaze in a gem studded case. Between 1093 and 1105 it was encased in a shrine, commissioned by King Domhnall Úa Lochlainn.

We saw back in Chapter Two that God’s original intention was for the Church of Jesus Christ to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Also the Gospel, by its very translatability, is wonderfully suited to be adapted to every human culture that has ever existed or ever will exist anywhere in the world. But this is one of those areas of life where Christianity and Christendom pull in opposite directions.

**Christendom and the Missionary Mandate**

Christendom, by its very nature, is tied to individual political units such as nations or Empires. The whole emphasis is on looking inward, binding together those who are the in-group (good Christian citizens). Those who live outside your borders are, by very definition, outsiders who cannot share in the benefits of citizenship or church membership. According to this mindset the best way to ‘evangelise’ outsiders is to conquer them through crusades or wars of religion. The absurdity of Christendom is perhaps nowhere better demonstrated than in times of war. Then you get clergy on both sides of the war praying for God to give the victory to their particular armies and to ensure the defeat of the others. When the Church and the State are joined at the hip, then why would anyone question whether God is on their side?
The progress of world missions over the centuries, then, can be read as a story of a struggle. It’s like the whole idea again of seeds that grow into plants that somehow break through concrete. You have the Christian Gospel, full of life and, by its very nature, seeking to branch out and spread. But you have the dead weight of Christendom, by its very nature, crushing the life out of that innate missionary impulse and seeking to distort anything that remains.

It is significant that the first great missionary expansion of the Church began as a result of an unplanned pressure from outside. Most major missionary breakthroughs in history have occurred because of accidents, coincidences, or because individuals felt impelled by God to go forth - rarely have denominational executives had much to do with it. After the Day of Pentecost, the Church had remained centred in Jerusalem, despite Christ having expressly told them that the reason they would receive the power of the Spirit was in order to be witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). But the persecution that followed the martyrdom of Stephen scattered the Christians out into the waiting mission field (Acts 8:1). The Gospel swiftly spread, as we read in the New Testament, into Ethiopia, through Asia Minor and into Europe. These early advances also saw churches established in North Africa, Syria, Persia and throughout the Roman Empire.

With the establishment of Christendom under Constantine the emphasis was on building a Christian Empire, not taking the Gospel to new fields. In fact, the next wave of missionary expansion occurred through groups that had been ostracised and labelled as heretical. Nestorians and other splinter groups
persecution in the Empire, so they pushed eastwards and established churches in Armenia, India and even China.

**Celtic Christianity**

Then, to the west, another mission field opened up. This was not initiated by the Imperial or ecclesiastical authorities, but largely through the efforts of one inspired individual. Patrick was a slave from western Britain (most likely modern Wales) who was kidnapped by Irish raiders and forced into slavery. Eventually he escaped, but he could not forget the darkness and superstition that dominated the Irish people. Patrick would return as the Apostle to Ireland.

On Easter of 433 AD, Patrick stood on the Hill of Slane in the Boyne Valley. The druids had decreed that no fires were to be lit in the Kingdom that day until the King himself lit a fire in honour of his pagan gods. Patrick lit a bonfire, causing the druids to cry out, “This fire, which has been lighted in defiance of the royal edict, will blaze for ever in this land unless it be this very night extinguished.” The fire continued to burn and Ireland experienced a national revival.

A Celtic Church grew out of Ireland and established monastic centres in Iona in Scotland and Lindisfarne in Northern England that would exercise great influence across Europe for several centuries. These monastic centres were not places of retreat from the world, as in Eastern Christianity, but rather missions stations that prepared missionaries to go out into the world. This missionary effort coincided with a period of confusion and lawlessness in Europe following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and invasions by various barbarian tribes. Pioneers such as Columba, Aidan, Columbanus and Kilian spread
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the Gospel far and wide. Celtic missionaries travelled as far as Iceland and Russia, and it is even thought that one missionary, Brendan the Voyager, may have reached America in the Sixth Century.

Some historians have questioned how much the Celtic Church was really distinct from Rome in matters of doctrine, but that is to miss the point of what made the Celtic Church so significant. The uniqueness of the Celtic Church was not its doctrinal differences, but its distance from the seat of political power. The Celtic monasteries were perched on the edge of, and even beyond, the Empire’s crumbling borders. This meant that their energies were able to concentrate on the conversion of unbelievers to Christ rather than in justifying or supporting Christendom’s Church/State project. The Celtic monasteries became centres of learning where the Scriptures, and indeed many other manuscripts, were copied, distributed and preserved. Eventually, as Christendom re-established itself across Europe, Celtic Christians were persuaded to toe the line and lost their missionary zeal. In the Twelfth Century King Henry II of England was authorised by the Pope to invade Ireland and to force the Irish Church to conform to the rule of Rome and to adopt the practices of the English Church. This was officially achieved at the Synod of Cashel in 1172.

Latin America

The next major developments in world missions would be inextricably linked with the whole concept of Christendom due to colonialism. As European nations began to establish colonies in America, Africa and Asia, forced conversion to Christianity often went hand in hand with political conquest and economic
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exploitation. In May 2007 Pope Benedict XVI caused a media controversy during a speech in Aparecida, Brazil, by claiming that indigenous peoples in the Americas had been “silently longing” for Christianity when the first priests arrived on that Continent. In one sense he was correct, because the religions followed by many of those native Americans were unbelievably cruel. The Mayans would rip the hearts, still beating, out of the chests of human sacrifices. Similarly, the Aztecs are estimated to have offered 20,000 human sacrifices a year in their ceremonies. So, it could be argued, any religion that came to Central and South America was an improvement!

However, the reason the Pope’s comments caused such controversy is because the arrival of Catholicism in America coincided with the wiping out of entire civilisations. Some of this, to be fair, was entirely unforeseen through disease. The American tribes lacked the antibodies to fight European diseases, so hundreds of thousands of natives died from smallpox, chickenpox and measles when the European conquistadors arrived. However, the colonialists also massacred large numbers of indigenous peoples and enslaved many more. The primary purpose for Spanish colonialism in what we now know as Latin America appears to have been to extract as much gold and silver as possible using the native population as slave labour. Many colonialists justified this by arguing that they had given the greatest benefit of all, namely eternal life, to the natives by forcing them to be baptised as Catholics. Therefore, they claimed, in return, it was only fair that they should enrich themselves from the land.
Slavery in the New World

One oft-ignored and neglected aspect of this shameful rape of a continent’s resources concerns the heroic efforts of missionary priests to protect the native peoples of Central and South America. There was constant friction between the conquistadors, who required slave labour to mine and transport gold and silver, and the Jesuits, who sheltered the natives and persuaded authorities in Europe (both secular and ecclesiastical) to condemn the actions of the colonialists. A number of laws were enacted by the governments of Spain and Portugal to restrict, and even prohibit, slavery, but these laws were swiftly repealed under pressure from the colonialists. In 1537 Paul III issued a papal bull condemning slavery and excommunicating slave-owners and slave-traders. The civil authorities made it illegal to publicise the papal bull and the Jesuits were driven out of South America. As often happens with Christendom, gold spoke louder than truth and justice.

South and Central America became ‘Latin’ America with most of the inhabitants speaking Spanish or Portuguese. It also became a continent where Roman Catholicism was the dominant religion – albeit a syncretistic form of Catholicism that often contained a large measure of pagan belief, practices and traditions.

China

Another important early mission field for the Catholic Church, but one that was conducted entirely differently, was China. Matteo Ricci founded the Jesuit China Mission, and in 1601 he was the first westerner to be permitted to enter the Forbidden City in Beijing. He became an advisor to the Emperor’s Court. One of the means by which Ricci obtained
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such access was due to his skills in science and mathematics. He was able to predict solar eclipses, and helped the Chinese to develop better maps, clocks and telescopes. Another Jesuit, Johann Adam Schall von Bell, became director of the Emperor's Observatory and achieved the highest possible rank at court of Guanglu Mandarin.126

Ricci used Confucian concepts to explain Christianity. Instead of presenting Christianity as something entirely new or foreign to China, he presented God as being the ‘Lord of Heaven’ of traditional Chinese teaching. This is strongly reminiscent of how the apostle Paul preached to the Athenians about ‘the unknown God’ (Acts 17:23). During this time over 270,000 Chinese converts were baptised.127 It is tempting to imagine how different Chinese history might have been if this innovative missionary outreach had been allowed to continue.

However, the concerns of Christendom would win out over the missionary impulse. Other monastic orders persuaded the Pope that the Jesuits’ methods were an ungodly compromise, and that the Chinese should renounce their previous culture and beliefs. Also, the Catholic Church now demanded that the Chinese Emperor should submit and pledge allegiance to the Papacy. As a result, missionaries were expelled from China and the Chinese converts were persecuted and, in many cases, massacred.

Many other Catholic missionary works, particularly in India and Africa, concentrated on meeting people’s physical needs through education, hospitals and orphanages.
The Protestant modern missionary movement began more through individuals than through denominational initiatives. Two Moravians from Denmark, Johann Dober and David Nitschmann, travelled as missionaries to St. Thomas in the Caribbean in 1732. (There is a modern urban legend, sadly not true, that claims that they sold themselves as slaves in order to do so.) Other Moravians founded missionary works in North America among the Mohicans and the Cherokees.

But it is William Carey who has become known as ‘the father of modern missions.’ Carey was a shoemaker from Northampton who had a burden to take the Gospel to the nations. He made a map of the world from shoe-leather, and used to pray over it as he worked. He also prepared for his future ministry by teaching himself Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Dutch and French!

In 1786, at a Baptist meeting, Carey expressed his desire to take the Gospel to the nations. He was told, “Young man, when God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine.” But Carey refused to be deflected from his vision, and in 1792 he published his famous book, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*. This called for the formation of a Baptist missionary society. One of Carey’s most quoted sayings was, “Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.”

The missionary society was indeed formed, and in November 1793 William Carey landed in India as a missionary. Other denominations adopted his ideas and soon a large number of missionary societies and organisations were sending workers into Asia and Africa.
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**Missionaries and Colonialism**

Many missionaries made little effort to adapt the Gospel message to the cultures they were supposed to be reaching. At times it seemed as if they were preaching the superiority of western culture rather than the Gospel of Christ. Others worked so closely with the colonial governments that it was hard to tell if they were really serving the interests of the Gospel or of the imperialism of their home countries. As Desmond Tutu, the Nobel prize-winning Anglican Archbishop expressed it, “When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible and we had the land. They said, ‘Let us pray.’ We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the Bible and they had the land!”

However, many missionaries were sacrificial and devoted, genuinely serving others and often laying down their lives on the mission field. The causes of malaria were not understood until 1898, so thousands of missionaries to Africa and Asia succumbed to ‘fever.’

One influential missionary who adopted innovative methods was Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission. Taylor encouraged his workers to adopt Chinese dress and customs. He famously said, “If I had a thousand pounds China should have it, if I had a thousand lives, China should have them. No! Not China, but Christ. Can we do too much for Him? Can we do enough for such a precious Saviour?” At the time Britain was using military might to force China to permit the opium trade, but Hudson Taylor was a prominent opponent of this policy.

Overall, the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries’ missionary efforts were a mixed blessing. Certainly the Gospel was taken to many nations, and the seeds were sown for future growth. Also, many missionaries displayed heroic self-sacrifice. However, with
very few exceptions, the missionary organisations were very paternalistic – not permitting native converts to hold leadership positions of any significance in the church. Also, missionaries often worked ‘hand in glove’ with the secular colonial authorities, assisting policies that were racist and exploitative. They brought Christianity to many parts of the world, but they also brought Christendom.
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A CENTURY OF RAPID CHANGE
(How We Ended Up with Fundamentalists, Pentecostals and Secularism)

“Many will go here and there to increase knowledge.” (Daniel 12:4)

Sometimes history is easier to understand the further you stand away from it. The closer you get to it, and even when it is happening before your very eyes, you find that the things you were so focused on turned out not to be the main event.

Looking back over the Twentieth Century, we can see that four huge stories were taking place that would change the face of Christianity.

Liberalism and Fundamentalism

Firstly, the predictions of many were confounded by the destruction of optimistic theological liberalism and the resurgence of evangelicalism. At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, there were increasing numbers of Christians who held loosely to the ideas of biblical inspiration and authority, preferring to treat the Scriptures as a source of good moral advice to help mankind, whose nature was seen as basically good, to keep steadily improving. This vague application of Christian influence, it was
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held, combined with increasing education, would lead to a new golden age of peace and prosperity.

Such woolly optimism was largely destroyed by the horrors of the First World War. Any shreds of it that lingered after 1918 were comprehensively buried by the Second World War – complete with the Nazi Holocaust, the fire-bombing of civilians in cities and the first use of atomic weapons. Those nations that were the most educated, and the most influenced by centuries of Christian teaching, proved themselves to be capable of the most awful atrocities.

A controversy in the Presbyterian Church in the United States in the 1920’s mirrored what was occurring in many other mainline Christian denominations. A group of conservative ministers, such as J. Gresham Machen, responded to growing liberalism by insisting that certain ‘fundamentals’ were essential to Christianity. These five fundamental truths were:

1. The inspiration and authority of the Bible
2. The virgin birth of Christ
3. Christ’s death as an atonement for sin
4. The bodily resurrection of Christ
5. The historical reality of Christ’s miracles

Thus was the term ‘fundamentalism’ coined. Today the word ‘fundamentalist’ has changed beyond all recognition and is often used as a term of abuse to refer to an unreasoning rejection of the outside world. But originally it simply described those who held to these five core Christian doctrines. The fundamentalists eventually lost their battle and left the Presbyterian Church to found a new denomination. It appeared as if theological liberalism had won the day.
Yet, as we look back with the benefit of hindsight, the opposite was the case. Those denominations which adopted theological liberalism have steadily declined in both numbers and influence. The forms of Christianity which have grown, often spectacularly, have been those that affirm the five fundamental doctrines that Machen and others sought to defend.

**Evangelicalism**

This growth, however, has largely occurred through Evangelicalism – a related movement which differs from fundamentalism more in style and approach than in terms of doctrinal belief. Fundamentalism was essentially a reactive movement that sought to stem the seeming inevitable rise of liberalism. Evangelicalism, however, has been much more proactive and self-confident. It is best typified in the ministry of Billy Graham who, while certainly affirming the five fundamentals of the 1920's controversy, presented a much more positive message of conversion and personal growth.

In 1973 Dean Kelley published a seminal book entitled *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*. Kelley was neither a Fundamentalist, an Evangelical nor a member of the ‘religious right.’ He was a liberal Methodist minister, a board member of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and an outspoken opponent of allowing prayer in schools. But he pointed out what was an unpalatable truth to many liberals – that congregations and denominations that affirmed the doctrines contained in the five fundamentals were growing, while those congregations and denominations which had embraced theological liberalism were declining at a catastrophic rate. That process has continued, and indeed has accelerated, in the four decades since Kelley’s book.
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Pentecostals and Charismatics

The second major story of the last 100 years, and one that is an integral part of the growth of Evangelicalism, has been the astonishing growth of Pentecostalism and the Charismatic movement. At the end of Chapter Eleven we saw how one lone woman, at an obscure Bible school in Topeka, Kansas, had received a Pentecostal experience and prayed in tongues at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. It has been estimated that, one century later, approximately 600 million people (equating to about ten percent of the world’s population) claimed a similar experience. This represents the fastest growing non-militaristic movement, either religious or non-religious, in the entire history of the human race!

In the words of theologian Harvey Cox, Pentecostalism is “a spiritual hurricane that has already touched nearly half a billion people, and an alternative vision of the human future whose impact may only be in its earliest stages today.” Alister McGrath, a noted Anglican thinker, describes the advent of Pentecostalism as “easily the most significant development within Protestantism in the Twentieth Century,” comparing its effects as being similar in scope to those of the Reformation in the Sixteenth Century.

Pentecostalism has also dramatically affected the way in which other churches worship. The contemporary worship style typified by Pentecostal congregations such as the Hillsongs Church in Australia is today found in hundreds of thousands of non-Pentecostal churches across the world. Evangelists such as Reinhard Bonnke have taken the mass-crusade methods of Dwight Moody and Billy Graham, blended them with ‘power evangelism’ where the sick are prayed for to receive healing, and
used them to reach much larger crowds. For example, Bonnke has held evangelistic meetings in Africa where over one million souls gather in a single service.

The Pentecostal experience has proven to be highly adaptable. It could not be confined to the older mainstream Pentecostal denominations, such as the Assemblies of God and the Church of God, but has overflowed in a multitude of varieties and expressions. These include African denominations such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God, whose annual Prayer Conference in Nigeria attracts over 3 million in attendance, and underground house churches in China. Other expressions of Pentecostalism have proved more controversial, such as the ‘health and wealth’ or Prosperity Gospel, and ‘white garment’ churches that blend Christian truth and pagan beliefs in a form of syncretism.

Indeed, Pentecostalism has been a crucial factor in the third big story of the Church in the Twentieth Century, namely the geographical shift away from the western world to the Global south.

Christianity and the Global South

At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, Christianity was seen as a predominantly European and North American religion, albeit one that operated missions programmes in other parts of the world. But those missions programmes were, for the most part, still controlled by westerners. Islam was seen as the dominant religion in Africa.

What has happened since then has been truly remarkable. Politically, African nations sought for, and achieved, independence. More often than not, the leaders in the fight to
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escape from colonialism were those who had received their education in missionary schools. The Christian faith gave indigenous peoples the courage and self-confidence to take on the empires that had governed them. In sub-Saharan Africa tens of millions of Christians now belong to churches and denominations that are led by Africans. Even in traditional denominations, the numbers of African members now far outweigh those in Europe and North America. For example, the numbers of Anglicans, or Episcopalians, in just one African nation (Nigeria) outnumber the combined total of all Anglicans in Europe and North America.137

Not only has Christianity become the dominant religion in Africa, but African ministers now lead the largest single congregations in some European countries, including Belgium, Ukraine and the United Kingdom.

In Asia the growth has been even more dramatic. At night in Seoul, Korea, it is impossible to miss the neon crosses of thousands of Pentecostal and Evangelical churches, including the largest single church congregation in the world – the Yoido Full Gospel Church. In Indonesia, the largest Muslim nation in the world, indigenous Pentecostal groups have attracted millions of members with some reporting over one hundred thousand members in a single congregation.

But the most remarkable story in Asia comes from China. Before the Communist Revolution, centuries of missionary endeavour had only brought a tiny percentage of the Chinese people to Christ. Under Chairman Mao, every effort was made to eradicate religion in China. Many western observers thought that the Church was all but destroyed. Yet, incredibly, a series of underground networks of unregistered house churches have, in
the face of intense persecution, sparked the greatest ever revival in Church History. Estimates vary, but it appears that there are now at least 100 million believers worshipping in the underground churches of China.\textsuperscript{158}

In Latin America, which was once solidly Roman Catholic, Pentecostalism has seen enormous growth, particularly among the oppressed and the downtrodden. This may not be viewed as overall Christian growth by those who define ‘Christian’ as anyone who is affiliated with a church, no matter how nominal or cultural that affiliation might be. But for those of us who see a ‘Christian’ as being someone who has made a personal decision to follow Christ, the Latin American situation ranks alongside Africa and Asia in terms of dramatic gains for the cause of the Gospel.

At the close of the Twentieth Century the centre of world Christianity had unmistakably shifted to the east and to the south. Most of the world’s Christians now live outside of Europe and North America, and present trends indicate that such a process will only increase.

**Warning Signs in the Midst of Growth**

However, in the midst of this global good news story there are some warning signs that should not be ignored. By the 1990’s one of the success stories in Africa as regards Church growth was Rwanda. Over 90% of the population claimed to be Christian. Yet, in 1994, the country descended into a terrifying genocide as members of the majority Hutu tribe massacred an estimated 800,000 of the Tutsi tribe in less than one hundred days. Many of the mass killings occurred in church buildings and, even more
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bizarrely, many were perpetrated by members of churches (including nuns and clergy). ¹³⁹

What went wrong in Rwanda? The answer should come as no surprise at this stage in our sweeping survey of two thousand years of Church History. Christendom had raised its ugly head once more.

David Gushee, an American Professor of Moral Philosophy, cites as a key factor in the genocide: “the cosy relationship enjoyed by the leaders of the Rwandan Catholic Church and of several Protestant denominations with the Hutu government”.¹⁴⁰ The churches in Rwanda had so wedded themselves to the power and structures of the State that to be a ‘Christian’ often meant little more than being born into Africa’s most Christian country. A nation in the global south had created a new Christendom that turned out to be every bit as murderous as the European Christendom that was created under Constantine and the Roman Empire centuries earlier.

We can see similar warning signs in Uganda where ‘Christian’ members of parliament, urged on by preachers, passed legislation that would install the death penalty as a punishment for homosexuals. Christianity, of course, should always promote high moral standards and holiness among its adherents. But to try to impose that morality upon non-Christians, and particularly to use force and violence in doing so, is a profoundly unchristian attribute that results when Christendom gets its hands on the reins of power.

The Collapse of Western Christendom

And that brings us to the fourth and final great story of the Church in the Twentieth Century. Christendom has, to a great
extent, collapsed in Europe. The same process, while taking longer to occur in the United States, is unmistakably underway – particularly in large cities and in certain regions of the nation (such as the north east or the south west).

I should stress that, with regard to the United States, Christendom took a different form than in Europe. In Europe, Christendom tended to be institutionally enshrined by law. So, for example, Church of England bishops were given special voting privileges in the parliamentary system. In other European countries, a national Church body was given financial support by the State, or even allowed to veto proposed government policies.

In the United States, due to the principle of separation of Church and State, these institutional forms of Christendom did not tend to exist. However, the churches still held the whip hand in setting the cultural values and standards and norms of the nation. In fact, most Europeans are bemused by the way in which American politicians, even today, will still invoke God so much in speeches, even when their personal lifestyles show no evidence of any godly influence.

This collapse of Christendom has, for many people, been confused with a collapse of Christianity. Therefore, you will hear people refer to European society as being ‘post-Christian.’ This, I contend, is a huge mistake. What has collapsed in Europe is the nominal and institutional form of religion. Many of the great cathedrals of the past now lie empty, not because Christianity has died in those cities, but because people are no longer compelled by law to attend worship, and because Christianity no longer pulls the strings in society to the extent that church attendance is necessary to be accepted in polite society.

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Learning to Thrive in Post-Christendom

In Europe, those forms of Christianity that are the most demanding in terms of commitment and adherence to the fundamentals of the faith are the very forms that are growing. Evangelicalism, and Pentecostalism in particular, thrive in a secular environment. (The word ‘secular’ is often misunderstood to refer to the absence of, or even the suppression of, religion. But here I use it in the sense of a society where no one religion or ideology is favoured, but all religions and ideologies are free to compete on a level playing field in a marketplace of ideas. This idea will be explored more fully in a later volume – but it means that secularism is a positive rather than a negative, at least for those of us who have the confidence to believe our faith will flourish when we rely on witness and evangelism rather than requiring State-sponsorship or coercion to force people into our churches.)

This collapse of Christendom in the west has not, apart from some worrying exceptions that we have already noted, been mirrored by the widespread rise of Christendom in Asia, Africa or Latin America. The growth of Christianity in those regions is remarkable, but in most cases Christians are still a minority, comprising less than 50% of their societies. Even where the numbers of Christians are surpassing the 50% mark, this usually represents many different denominations and forms of Christianity, making it difficult if not impossible for one particular organisation to jump into bed with the State, as happened with Constantine and Catholicism, and so to start imposing their views and values upon others.

This is an area where more research needs to be carried out, but it seems likely that the new Christendom that developed in
A Century of Rapid Change

Rwanda, with tragic results, was facilitated by the disproportionate strength of one or two mainline denominations which had inherited Christendom structures and attitudes from their old colonial masters. In most countries in the global south this is, thankfully, not the case.

And this is where the four big stories of the Church in the Twentieth Century merge together, like streams that combine to form a mighty river. The failure of theological liberalism and the collapse of Christendom are two aspects of the same process. Globalisation and the free availability of information on the internet make it increasingly harder for any one religion to enforce its values on everyone else, or to focus on the narrow interests of one State. The only way this can be done is by attempting to cut a society off from technology and freedom. Communism failed to achieve this in the Twentieth Century, and it is doubtful whether militant Islam can do it any more successfully in the Twenty First Century.

The collapse of theological liberalism and western Christendom has produced secular societies in which other ideologies and faiths rush to fill the vacuum. The predictions of sociologists in the 1970’s and 1980’s, loudly proclaiming the impending death of religion, have been spectacularly confounded. Statistics increasingly indicate that Evangelicalism, and particularly its Pentecostal incarnation, is better poised to flourish and reach hearts and minds than are atheism or New Age philosophies.

The emergence of Pentecostal Christianity as a worldwide phenomenon has, in the opinion of some perceptive commentators, been largely due to its status as a subculture. In the words of Alister McGrath, “One of the most distinctive
features of Pentecostalism is its total disconnection with any notion of Christendom. Pentecostalism was free to develop its own post-Christendom paradigms and often retrieved pre-Christendom strategies without even realising it.”
REVIEW OF BOOK FOUR

(THE SAVIOUR OF THE WHOLE WORLD)

We have seen how the spread of the Gospel across the globe has been uneven, with sacrificial witness at times, yet also with disappointments and false starts.

It is hard to say whether the condemnation of the Nestorians and the monophysites as heresies helped them or hindered them. Initially it may have been an advantage, since it freed them to spread in areas where being an enemy of Rome was considered a good thing! But, in the longer term, it is more probable that they were damaged by being isolated from other Christians, particularly in times of persecution by unbelievers or by Islam.

The Orthodox Church also suffered and retreated in the face of Islam, taking on nationalistic forms after the Fall of Constantinople.

Promising missionary outreaches by the Irish across Europe and by Jesuits in China failed to reach their potential as they were forced to conform to the agenda of Christendom. Most Protestant missions, with a few wonderful exceptions, also chose to ally themselves to, and ride on the coat-tails of, colonialism.
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In the Twentieth Century, however, the collapse of Christendom and the meteoric rise of Pentecostalism helped fuel a genuinely global spread of Christianity.

**Recommended Further Reading**

*Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 years* by Philip Jenkins (HarperOne, 2010). A wonderfully readable account of the political intrigues that led to the Nestorians and the monophysites being condemned as heretics.


*Why Conservative Churches are Growing* by Dean M. Kelley (Harper & Row, 1972). The book that, more than any other,
served to expose the destructive effects of theological liberalism upon church growth.

The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South by Philip Jenkins (Oxford University Press, 2006). An examination of the shift of Christianity's centre to Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Christianity’s Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution - A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First by Alister McGrath (HarperOne, 2007). We listed this as a resource in an earlier section of the book, but it also makes very interesting points about the significance of Pentecostalism.

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“Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.” (Ephesians 5:15-16)

And so we come to the end of this brief overview of the twenty centuries that separate us from the world of Jesus and His first apostles. This book makes no pretence to be a definitive textbook of Church History. Instead we have tried to focus on the key events and personalities that have shaped the Church to become what we see today.

The question of how on earth we ended up here is important. But only inasmuch as it helps us decide where we go next. We need to be honest and recognise the role that Christendom, with its centre in the west, has played in shaping the Church. Then we need to determine which of these inherited factors will hinder or help us as we face the challenge of ministering in a post-Christendom world with its centre in the global south.

**What If?**

Several key questions need to be answered, and the answers that prevail may well determine what happens next in Church History. Will we lose our way and allow Christendom to condemn us to repeat the mistakes of the past? There have been several tantalising points in history where it looked as if
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Christianity might fulfil the potential of the Day of Pentecost. What if the Montanists had been tolerated and allowed to practice a form of Christianity that was based more on the leading of the Holy Spirit than on institutional and political power? What if the Nestorians, instead of being cut adrift as heretics, had been encouraged to continue their spread eastwards beyond the reach of the Roman Empire? What if the Celtic Church had been left alone for a few more centuries to continue its missionary outreach? What if the Jesuit outreach in China, instead of being quashed in the interests of concerns in Rome, had developed into a strong Chinese indigenous church in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries?

Unresolved Issues

Counterfactual history (studying the ‘What ifs?’ of history) may be interesting. But our most important ‘What ifs’ concern the future rather than the past. In 2010 I attended the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization at Cape Town, South Africa. It was inspiring and fascinating to meet with key Christian leaders and missionaries from across the globe. It was a time of celebration and of challenge. Stirring declarations and predictions came from the platform, and various committees contributed to a subsequent document called ‘The Cape Town Commitment.’ However, in my humble role as one of over 5000 delegates, I noticed several significant unresolved issues:

1. Although the Congress featured a wide range of speakers from various continents, it was noticeable that most of the speakers from the global south had been educated and mentored in either the UK or the USA. Their passports may have been issued by many
nations, but their perspective was still predominantly that of the west. This becomes more significant when we remember that the US, in particular, is where Christendom is lingering the longest.

2. There was some tension between Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals at the Congress. A video, purporting to give an overview of Evangelical missionary work over the years, made only one passing reference to Pentecostalism. A number of Pentecostal delegates felt slighted by this. Given that the majority of Evangelical growth worldwide in the last century has been through Pentecostals, such a grievance would seem justified. But, as a Pentecostal myself, I found myself asking why we felt so slighted. Why was it so important for us to feel that we were recognised by our Evangelical brethren? New religious movements have a tendency to seek the respect of older churches and denominations. This can cause them to ape the structures and attitudes of longer established groups, and in so doing to lose their distinctive characteristics and their missionary zeal.

3. A number of speakers at Cape Town were forthright in their denunciation of any form of syncretism, including the ‘health and wealth’ Prosperity Gospel. This in itself did not unduly bother me. I personally see grave dangers in an uncritical merging of the Gospel with ‘the American Dream’ of continually acquiring more possessions and seeking fulfilment in worldly success, personal comfort and happiness. However, I found more than a whiff of hypocrisy in
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the way that statistics were continually cited to demonstrate how Evangelical Christianity was growing so explosively around the globe. What was not acknowledged was that a large proportion of this growth was occurring through churches and ministries that preach the self same Prosperity Gospel as was being so roundly condemned.

This all leads to some important questions that may well determine where we go in the future.

The Distorting Influence of Wealth

Firstly, will the United States continue to exercise a disproportionate influence over global Christianity? American Christians comprise a relatively small proportion of the world’s believers, but they also hold the majority of the wealth owned by Christians. We all know the old adage that ‘Those who have the gold make the rules.’ Due to this wealth imbalance, Christians in other countries often look at American churches as the standard to which they aspire. Yet, as we have seen, the United States is the one part of the world where Christendom values and attitudes are still the most influential. This means that the churches in other parts of the world are frequently ‘ahead of the curve’ in that they are already successfully ministering in a context that looks increasingly like America’s future. If we all lived on a level economic playing field, then American church leaders would be visiting overseas churches to learn how to effectively do ministry in the next generation. Will the economic imbalance distort that process, in a form of financial colonialism, so that those who are ahead of the curve try to copy those who are behind the curve? That would be a recipe for disaster.
Will the Marginalised Get Respectable?

Secondly, will Pentecostals sacrifice zeal for respectability? Much of Pentecostalism developed from a holiness tradition where they based their beliefs and practices on the Gospels and the Book of Acts. Their emphasis on spiritual gifts and miracles was not primarily because Paul taught about these things in his epistles, but rather because the first apostles did these things.

However, many Pentecostals, craving the recognition and respect of their Evangelical colleagues, now present themselves simply as fundamentalists with spiritual gifts as an ‘add on.’ This has caused them to give a greater primacy to the epistles of Paul than to the Gospels or the Book of Acts. Many baptistic groups have long insisted that historical narrative portions of Scripture should not be used to determine doctrinal beliefs. If this notion becomes more prevalent among Pentecostals, then we must question how long their dramatic growth will continue.

Innovation and Zeal without Syncretism?

Which leads, rather neatly, into our third question, addressing the thorny issue of syncretism and the Prosperity Gospel. It could well be argued that classical Pentecostals, in pursuing ecclesiastical respectability, are in danger of losing their connection with the very demographic that has propelled their dramatic growth. Increasingly, some Pentecostals are adapting the trappings of Christendom. A ministry/laity divide is developing – even though one of the classic factors in Pentecostal growth has been its ability to involve ordinary men and women in ministry. As Pentecostal leaders lay increasing stress on their ministerial titles and doctorates, should we be surprised if a newer variation...
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of their faith makes a connection with the poor and the downtrodden?

The Roman Catholic hierarchy, by suppressing liberation theology in Latin America, effectively abandoned the poor and oppressed – leaving a vacuum which Pentecostals have willingly filled. The question must be asked as to whether Pentecostals might not in turn make the same mistake. If Pentecostalism adopts the trappings of Christendom and aligns itself with those with political and economic power, then should we be surprised if the message “You can also have your slice of the American dream if you have enough faith” ends up filling the resultant vacuum among the world’s poor?

There are certain patterns that seem to repeat themselves in Church History. One is that reform and renewal movements tend to lose their edge. Then new movements arise. Yet the greatest opposition to each new movement often comes from the movement that immediately preceded it. This response may be triggered by shame. The new religious movement reminds us of our unsophisticated past before we developed our respectable structures and traditions! Is it possible that Pentecostals are ashamed because the Prosperity Gospel reminds them that they themselves were raw and despised less than a century ago? It is hard to forget how G. Campbell Morgan, noted preacher at Westminster Chapel in London and author of one of the pamphlets that launched fundamentalism, described the Pentecostal movement as “the last vomit of Satan.” Can Pentecostals overcome their shame and work with the proponents of the Prosperity Gospel to maintain their zeal while avoiding syncretism?
So Where Do We Go From Here?

These are questions that cannot be ignored. The way we answer them will determine how we do church and ministry in a post-Christendom world. The changes in both Church and society in this current generation are so great that there is little doubt that we stand at one of those pivotal moments in time – what Thomas Cahill calls ‘The Hinges of History.’ Hopefully this current volume will contribute to a greater understanding of the forces that have shaped us – appreciating how on earth we ended up here. We have received some precious treasures from the last twenty centuries, treasures that we dare not lose if we are still to call ourselves Christians. But we have also picked up some of the baggage of Christendom along the way, baggage that will need to be jettisoned if we are to avoid the mistakes of the past. How we distinguish between the treasures and the baggage, and how we build effective churches in a post-Christendom society, are questions that will be tackled in another volume.
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